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SCREEN

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TELEVISION IN THE THIRD AGE
Deregulation/Reregulation?

INTRODUCTION

Despite the long delay over its publication, the White Paper *Broadcasting in the 90s: Competition, Choice and Quality* (CMD 517) shows little sign of serious homework. In August 1986, *Screen* published a special double issue on 'The Crisis in Broadcasting' and it is instructive to see how many of the concerns expressed therein remain unresolved today. There is the continuing determination to remove or weaken the role of the State as a positive force in broadcasting, and to project its removal as freedom from restraint or deregulation. Such a removal, of course, is not an exercise in the removal of restraint so much as re-subjection of broadcasting to another form of regulation. This 'deregulatory' impetus in evidence since the Hunt Report on Cable (1982) is, of course, a hallmark of the Thatcher administration overall and raises the familiar spectre of disentitlement, and impairment of, especially, services for special needs, that accompanies the incursion of the market into areas of public service generally.

Television, or communications in general, can be subjected to a regime that regards it as a 'toaster with pictures' as Mark Fowler, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission under the Reagan Administration had it. But this precise echo of the view that films and beans are the same because they are canned is clearly a pretext for avoiding the unavoidable: the complex range of needs met by commodities of the 'fancy' (and within that those commodities that aim to serve social needs rather than private appetites) are poorly served by the market alone.

The current mixed economy in broadcasting, of course, recognises this and it will be recalled that

even the Peacock Committee (1986), the body that set the agenda of deregulation, was driven to draw back from proposing a single system based on commercial *laissez-faire* and selected subscription as the only feasible alternative to licence fee funding. Even now the leading lights of this committee, Peacock and Brittain, have balked at the haste with which the Government intends to switch the funding basis of the BBC. Nor will the narcotically deployed example of American broadcasting provide unconditional support for the virtues of commercial *laissez-faire*. The history of Public Service Broadcasting in the United States, however uneven, demonstrates the lack of fit between the 'marketplace of ideas' and the market.

Nevertheless it is apparent that the direction is firmly in favour of deregulation. Yet this policy direction is far from being an example of resolute action. If such action implies a stand against current trends, then a rigorous resort to strengthening public service provision would show resolution. The White Paper is more nearly a response, and an inadequate one at that, to the general tendency for national broadcasting to become more fully integrated into the force field of transnational corporations. Such a process of integration has occurred (or is occurring) laterally across national boundaries and in depth with an ever increasing national concentration of ownership and control. Such a process of integration is being matched in turn, as Michelle Mattelart has pointed out, by a concentration at the level of the symbolic, a repetitious resort either in form or content to the image bank of the American media. Such images, for a variety of historical reasons,

continue to offer the lowest level of risk either under direct market (cinema) or indirect market (broadcasting) conditions.

Given this larger development, the provisions of the White Paper take on a local or parochial character. First, given the Government's commitment to free enterprise, it is no surprise that the BBC and, *mutatis mutandis*, the IBA structure should be perceived as a hotbed of bureaucratic inefficiency and protectionism. Whatever the merits or demerits of the BBC's (or the IBA's) current interpretation of public service, it constitutes a 'squeeze' on available airtime and commercial opportunity. But the problem of what the BBC stands for – in essence the principle that the market should accommodate itself to some national plan – is only exacerbated by the anti-corporatist politics of the Thatcher administration.

As Andrew Gamble points out in *The Free Economy and the Strong State: the Politics of Thatcherism*, the tendency to concentrate policy making within the narrow confines of the state élite, especially the Cabinet (and a purged Cabinet at that) has meant that the media have become an unusually important factor in legitimating Government action. If the media are increasingly required to deliver, if not a consensus, at least a serviceable image of consensus within the public sphere, then against the backdrop of a largely acquiescent press, public service requirements for 'balance' and 'impartiality' constitute a clear impediment. The history of Government interventions, from *Real Lives* to the banning of the Sinn Féin, merely underscore the general point in the area of current affairs. Likewise the history of former efforts, now realised in the White Paper, to bring the broadcasting authorities under the ruling of the Obscene Publications Act points to the 'dangers' perceived in popular pleasures. The creation of the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the replacement of the IBA by the Independent Television Commission may indeed be seen as re-inventing the already considerable powers of the BBC and the IBA (and the pressure to pre-censorship that these entail). But, more to the point, the creation of these 'superfluous' bodies reflects an impatience with the small measure of pluralism now operating. These symptoms of distrust of public service institutions – only endorsed by a series of politically motivated appointments such as Lord Chalfont to Deputy Chairmanship of the IBA – should be seen as

exposing a fundamental weakness in the Government's hegemonic project.

As Raymond Williams once pointed out, the ideological and commercial requirements of capitalism, particularly in the sphere of culture, may enter into contradiction. On the surface much of this conflict has turned around the notion of a consumer-led expansion because what the market wants is not always what the Government feels it should have. Redoubtable free marketeers, like Sir Alfred Sherman, have berated the White Paper on these very grounds. But there is a profounder aspect. The new key satellite technologies were developed in the specific context of transcending 'local' conditions such as national culture and national broadcasting. As pointed out above, there is every reason to suppose that the semiotic centre of such developments will be the social imaginary of the American media – with its strongly and complexly articulated tradition of populism and anti-deference. It hardly needs to be said that for the Government so strongly committed to the politics of deference such a development represents a 'wild' card. More decisively, it shows up a chronic potential for haemorrhage at the ideological level of its hegemonic project. Such a potential only inheres because economically – and hegemony requires an economic basis if it is to be sustained – the Government needs to identify itself with an expanding area of nationally located capitalism. The leisure provision and communications constitutes just such an area. The rate of pretax profit increase among the *Financial Times* 500 for Entertainment, Leisure, Advertising and Broadcast Media ranges from 37 to 90 per cent and globally, the increasing pace of concentration and conglomeration testifies to potential for accumulation on a grand scale, in the long, if not the medium term. A particular conjunctural factor in the British case is the enormous potential represented after 1992 by a unified European market, bigger than the American and Japanese home markets combined and the failure in recent times of Pan European Satellite delivery to move into profitability. The agenda for these opportunities seems clear: for nationally located branches of international media capital (Murdoch) or national capital on the way to internationalisation (Carlton Communications) to establish a national base from which to ride on the back of trans-national development.

Evidently the provision of local television (by

cable and MVDS) and the expansion of commercial radio at a local and national level, only optionally pursuing a public service pattern, will add a compensatory dynamic towards national provision. But it seems unlikely that the expansion in a such services will seriously counter-balance the opening out of British 'audio visual space' to the international image market; not the least, because these latter developments will occur within a context of provision dominated by trans-national corporations. Given these prospects the Government's proposals exhibit not strength, but the strength of compromise – its hegemonic project remains incomplete, unless it secures an economic base, yet in legislating to secure such a base it becomes a client (once again) of forces it cannot actually control. Ironically, public service provision offers the only viable site for the development of a 'national popular' culture on which Thatcherism could feed its project. But the very texture of such provision, because it gives space, however unevenly to the Dereks Jameson and Jarman, is something the Government is reluctant to sustain. It would seem to indicate anything but a command of events, that in order to associate itself with some of the developing areas of 'free enterprise' the Government must move in direction of weakening, if not marginalising, the form of institution where potentially it might establish the ideological dimension of its hegemony.

Finally, with regard to the consumer – the putative beneficiary of these developments – it is difficult to assess the outcome of the proposed changes. The infrastructure is inherently uncertain: the proposal for public service provision on subscription, the increased levy on the IBA franchisees, the weak financial base of DBS even on a national basis and the role of VCR as an alternative delivery system all raise serious questions of viability. But the technically inscribed potential for greater choice poses its own contradiction: the movement toward consumer choice, which may turn out to be a greater choice for an affluent minority, has been seen as movement away from mass to decentralised and segmented markets. Alternatively, this 'Post Fordist' development may only be a short term phenomenon as the mass market restructures itself around a new scale of provision and accumulation. Mass markets have never been incompatible with the cultivation of subcultures of taste – Hollywood in its heyday differentiated its product by genres and stars. The

question is whether 'taste' subcultures are derived from publics – communities of discourse – or from the dynamics of internally unrelated aggregates ('series'). Public service obligations entail recognition of the former, even if minority based; market mechanisms only recognise 'taste' subcultures that are sufficiently large or sufficiently affluent to subscribe or attract advertising patronage. It is too soon to be sure, but the much-trumpeted fanfare to consumer choice may turn out to be the sound of the mass market resettling its well worn furniture.

It would be salutary to conclude that the White Paper addressed some of these issues, even in its own terms. But it is hard to disagree with Jonathan Miller's view that the document is a mishmash of competing claims: Home Office paternalism, Department of Trade and Industry economic liberalism, Treasury greed and Prime Ministerial moral outrage. In the meantime responses to the White Paper number 2,500. In public both Douglas Hurd and Timothy Renton have flagged possible concessions. The most important of these are likely to be:

(1) Channel Four will not be wholly self financing: a provision of a safety net subsidy of 14 per cent of ITV companies' revenue will be available if necessary.

(2) The franchisees for the ITV companies will no longer be assigned on the basis of a straight 'cash' auction. IBA Chairman George Russell's threat to resign is likely to force a rethink on the duration of the franchise, the phasing of the payment for it and the operation of quality criteria in allocation. None the less, the increases in the Levy on ITV from 1990 suggest that the projected revenue crises will not disappear. The recent scrapping or suspension of national agreements with 'talent' and technical unions indicate that the drive to lower costs, will continue. (Notwithstanding the Monopolies and Mergers Commission's recent finding that such unions are not guilty of restrictive practices against the public interest.) Further concentration through a series of mergers amongst the major IBA franchise holders seems very likely.

(3) The loophole in provisions 6.51 and 6.53 of the White Paper that would permit a major national newspaper owner e.g. Robert Maxwell, already holding a 20 per cent share in Central, to own one or two regional ITV franchises is likely to be rethought. But the forces of concentration

manifest themselves at many levels: the entry of 'deep pocket' players like Eddie Shah into independent production raises serious questions about the fate of the independent sector as the term is currently understood.

The various contributors to this issue address *inter alia* aspects of these developments: focusing on the White Paper itself, the current shift in employer strategies and trade union responses to

the 'crisis', the achievements of Channel Four, the lessons of deregulation in the US and aspects of technological change. Given a turbulent environment, these assessments must remain provisional. But all in all they provide some important benchmarks against which to assess the impending legislation and the major forces at play as the 'Third Age of Broadcasting' comes covered in confusion to the UK.

Barry King

WHITE AND GREEN AND NOT MUCH READ

RICHARD COLLINS EVALUATES THE WHITE PAPER ON BROADCASTING POLICY

¹ Samuel Britton, 'The Fight for Freedom in Broadcasting', *Political Quarterly*, vol 58 no 1, January-March, 1987, p 4.

² Home Office, *Broadcasting in the '90s: Competition, Choice and Quality*, London, HMSO, 1988.

³ See, inter alia, Department of Trade and Industry, *Report on the Potential for Microwave Video Distribution Systems in the UK*, London, HMSO, 1988; Home Office, *Radio: Choices and Opportunities*, London HMSO, 1987; Alan Peacock (Chairman) *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, London, HMSO, 1986.

*In putting forward the idea of a free broadcasting market without censorship, Peacock exposed many of the contradictions in the Thatcherite espousal of market forces. In principle, Mrs Thatcher and her supporters are all in favour of deregulation, competition and consumer choice. But they are also even more distrustful than traditionalist Tories such as Douglas Hurd of plans to allow people to listen to and watch what they like, subject only to the law of the land. They espouse the market system but dislike the libertarian value judgments involved in its operation.*¹

BROADCASTING POLICY IN THE UK has seldom been a hotter issue. There has been an accelerating flow of official documents of which the Home Office's White Paper *Broadcasting in the '90s: Competition, Choice and Quality*² is probably the penultimate statement – to be followed by a new broadcasting act in 1989. But it is not just the structural issues of broadcasting policy, concerning the finance and organisation of broadcasting institutions (addressed in numerous official documents³), which have been the object of official attention. For the Government has made unprecedentedly explicit use of its powers (in the BBC Licence and the 1981 Broadcasting Act) to prohibit transmission of particular messages.

The banning of broadcast actuality coverage of statements by speakers on behalf of or in support of two lawful political organisations, Sinn Féin and the Ulster Defence Association, is unprecedented. The rationale offered for his act by the Home Secretary Douglas Hurd is contradictory. Statements by the UDA and Sinn Féin are deemed to be both so repugnant to UK audiences for radio and television as to require the audience to be protected from them and persuasive enough to attract audiences' support for illegal terrorism and thus to require their suppression. The ban follows an assumption that terrorists must be denied (in the Prime Minister's words) 'the oxygen of publicity'.

It is questionable whether the presence or absence of actuality coverage of statements of support for the UDA or Sinn Féin affects terrorism in the UK and Ireland, particularly since twenty years of broadcasters'

coverage of events in Northern Ireland has followed Lord Hill's precept (when Chairman of the Governors of the BBC) that 'as between the British Army and the gunman the BBC is not and cannot be impartial'.⁴ It is more likely that curtailment of direct representation of the views of an elected Westminster MP, sixty elected local councillors in Northern Ireland (and more in the Republic) and a party that attracts 35 per cent of the Nationalist vote in Northern Ireland will have an effect that is the reverse of that intended by the UK Government. Rather than reducing support for Sinn Féin (and the UDA) the Government's measures may reduce Northern Ireland nationalists' tolerance of the UK political order which denies parity of representation to lawful political organisations.

A principal aim of counter-terrorism is to win the support, or at least acquiescence, of the 'floaters' who have no firm commitment to either state or terrorist organisations. The state's reduction of civil liberties for legal organisations may lead to loss of popular support and/or acquiescence for the state and a corresponding shift by 'floaters' towards organisations opposed to the state and its institutions. Unless the UK state guarantees formal political rights (including access to representation in broadcasting equal to that enjoyed by other lawful political organisations) for all lawful political organisations its legitimacy declines and the pragmatic effect of measures such as those imposed by the Government will be, from the Government's point of view, negative.

The increased use of the repressive powers of the UK Government in broadcasting is not confined to suppression of representation of lawful political organisations but also extends to suppression of representation of sex and violence by a new censorship body, the Broadcasting Standards Council, chaired by Lord Rees-Mogg (to be given statutory authority in the forthcoming Broadcasting Act).

The White Paper's stated *raison d'être* is extension of viewer (and listener) choice and augmentation of consumer sovereignty. To this end it proposes substantial changes in organisation and regulation of broadcast television (and radio).

*The Government places the viewer and listener at the centre of broadcasting policy. Because of technological, international and other developments, change is inevitable. It is also desirable: only through change will the individual be able to exercise the much wider choice which will soon become possible. The Government's aim is to open the door so that individuals can choose for themselves from a much wider range of programmes and types of broadcasting.*⁵

Yet this profession of liberalisation and devolution of authority is impossible to reconcile with the new repressive powers and augmented repressive actions of Government. The central question therefore posed by the White Paper is: is Government broadcasting policy internally coherent (in which case professions of liberal intent such as that cited

⁴ Letter to the Home Secretary, cited in Lord Hill, *Behind the Screen*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1974, p 209.

⁵ *Broadcasting in the '90s*, op cit, para 1.2.

above must be judged mendacious) or contradictory – asserting simultaneously stricter control by Government and structural change in order to give ‘viewer and listener a greater choice and a greater say’.⁶

Diversity, Quality and Popularity?

Discussion of the White Paper has largely been hostile (here there is room for a fascinating sociology of who speaks, the agenda-setting function of interested parties, particularly the broadcasters, and of the belief system and interests of the UK media élite) and has mobilised two categories in defence of the status quo – diversity (range) and quality in television programming. The White Paper deploys these categories and adds a welcome third: popularity. These important notions are difficult to operationalise and have tended in the UK to be assigned as an exclusive property of public service systems.

Diversity is relatively easy to research and empirically test *post hoc* (whether a particular institutional form for broadcasting offers more or less diversity than another). But it is hard to predict whether a new institutional arrangement will, *propter hoc*, deliver more or less diversity than its predecessor. In a single channel broadcasting environment diversity can only come via ‘internal diversity’ (mixed programming), but as channels proliferate ‘internal diversity’ tends to decline and to be supplanted by ‘external diversity’ as individual channels become less mixed in their programming and differentiate themselves from each other with a strong and consistent ‘brand’ image (so that viewers’ and listeners’ search time for a particular kind of programming is reduced). Changes in UK broadcasting (independent of the White Paper) are leading to a decline in internal diversity, but not necessarily to reduction in diversity realised through different means, externally. There are undoubtedly institutional arrangements in which neither internal nor external programme diversity exists. (And programme diversity does not map exactly on to diversity of programme producers and suppliers – another important kind of diversity.)

US network television well exemplifies a condition of neither internal diversity (types of programmes scheduled) nor external diversity (channels have a similar programme mix and tend to schedule similar programmes at the same time, e.g. news programmes at 10 pm) reducing viewer choice. But such conditions may also apply in public service conditions (e.g. in Italy before 1976 and arguably in contemporary West Germany) and may be absent in commercial for profit broadcasting environments (e.g. US radio and cable television). The absence or presence of diversity (whether internal or external) cannot be attributed to a single factor whether public or private ownership, mode of finance or number of channels, though all of these factors are important. Decline in ‘internal diversity’ in UK broadcasting may, or may not, be paralleled by an increase in ‘external diversity’. Blumler, Nossiter and Brynjin claim that:

*the range of programming available to all the population in the UK is among the most extensive, if not actually the most extensive, provided by the major broadcasting systems studied.*⁷

However, diversity in the present (pre-White Paper) arrangements for public broadcasting in the UK should not be too readily assumed.

Stephen Hearst, leading guru of public service broadcasting (formerly the BBC's Controller of Radio 3, Controller of the BBC Future Policy Group and Special Assistant to the Director General) suggests that the role of broadcasting is to promote social integration and assimilation of minority ethnic groups into the dominant culture, thus reducing diversity. Accordingly he criticises the growth of community radio and its challenge to the BBC for institutionalising cultural difference and for maintaining diversity:

*We need to ask what the likely social and educational effects of community radio might be if local sets are largely, if not permanently, switched onto its new wavelengths. Over the centuries immigration has been of immense benefit to Britain. Social integration has nearly always been successfully accomplished. Now we are about to license an electronic medium which, uncontrolled, could have the unintended effect of delaying such integration.*⁸

If the role of broadcasting is to reduce diversity in the population of viewers and listeners then it is unsurprising that audiences have refused the BBC's invitation to become more like it. And that BBC and independent local radio services have been supplemented by hundreds of unlicensed 'pirate' radio stations which deliver substantially more diversity than authorised public service radio.

But, whether or not diversity is best realised in a status quo or in changed arrangements for broadcasting, a problem remains. Internal or external diversity, whether delivered by public service or by 'for profit' broadcasters has still to be matched to the demand for diversity from audiences. How are we to know whether too little or too much diversity is offered? Or whether diversity of one kind (A, B, C, D) is preferred, or not, to diversity of another kind (1, 2, 3, 4)?

Blumler, Nossiter and Brynin's study⁹ is the most serious attempt to grapple with the intractable notions of diversity (range is the category they use) and quality. As we have seen diversity is by no means an easy category, but quality is even more difficult. How is a proposition such as '*Brideshead Revisited* is quality television' to be tested and either confirmed or refuted? The problem is intractable. The valiant attempt by Blumler et al to address it by canvassing the views of professional broadcasters (unsurprisingly concluding that, whatever quality is, there's certainly lots of it in UK broadcasting) is open to the summary refutation offered by the Peacock Committee – that broadcasters' judgment on each others' work is not a reliable guide to audience judgments:

⁷ J Blumler, T Nossiter and M Brynin, in Home Office, *Research on the Range and Quality of Broadcasting Services*, West Yorkshire Media in Politics Group for the Committee on Financing the BBC, London, HMSO, 1986, p 167.

⁸ S Hearst, 'Neighbourhood Watch', the *Guardian*, July 4, 1988, p 23.

⁹ Blumler et al, op cit.

¹⁰ Alan Peacock, *op cit*, para 198.

¹¹ *ibid*, para 198.

*It is entirely understandable that so much attention is paid in the Annual Reports of both the BBC and IBA to the most important professional symbols of success – EMMY or BAFTA awards . . . However the award of professional accolades . . . can only be at most an indirect guide to what will promote the interests of those for whom the system is ultimately designed.*¹⁰

Diversity and quality, categories mobilised in the broadcasting policy debate largely by defenders of the status quo, are difficult to operationalise and are, it seems, insufficiently to be found within the present UK broadcasting system to satisfy audiences. Peacock cited a MORI survey for the National Consumer Council which found that 46 per cent of television viewers said they were: 'very or fairly satisfied with the quality of television against 45 per cent who were very or fairly dissatisfied' and added:

*all our experience of measuring consumers' attitudes show that you can normally expect 75-80 per cent to say that they are satisfied with a service whatever it is. 46 per cent satisfaction is a very low figure.*¹¹

The evaluation of current Government policy (and of the White Paper in particular), is further complicated because *Broadcasting in the '90s*, although a 'White Paper', has many 'green edges' – that is, it represents an agenda for discussion as well as a declaration of official intent. On balance, the White Paper (and Government policy) is better understood as the unstable resultant of contradictory ideas and conflicting interests rather than as a coherent, and consistently repressive policy which nakedly reveals itself in new censorship policies but veils its weakening of 'intermediate institutions', between the state and civil society under a rhetorical assertion of public choice and devolved power.

But, because there are a lot of green edges to the White Paper, judgments must be provisional. The White Paper signals both the continuing conflicts within Government over broadcasting policy (and which principles should inform policy) and the difficulties of implementing agreed principles in new conditions. While its specific recommendations are not always firm, some evident general principles underpin the White Paper which reflect responses to important shifts in the broadcasting environment, and new ideas which have entered the policy discourse between the last sustained period of Government reflection on broadcasting policy (from publication of the Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting in 1977 – the Annan Report – and the Broadcasting Act of 1981) and the present.

National Broadcasting and internal diversity: Waning Powers?

Governments, including the UK Government, do not now control their own communication destiny and must make history on terms less of their own choosing than heretofore. For example, the White Paper's

proposals for radio include the establishment (following the Green Paper, *Radio: Choices and Opportunities*, 1987) of the UK's first national advertising-financed radio channels. Were the UK not to launch national advertising-financed radio it would be vulnerable to a leakage of advertising revenue to Ireland, where a medium-wave commercial radio station, *Ráíó Tara*, receivable in the UK, is to be established. For the UK not to be economically disadvantaged it must establish its own national advertising-financed radio channel(s). It must respond to an agenda set by others.

Changes in UK broadcasting policy reflect the global phenomenon of 'deregulation', a waning of confidence in state and parastatal agencies and waxing confidence in competition and the market as allocative agencies. Such changes are symptoms of the growing assumption of power by a new class. The emergent 'radical' middle class, best represented by Mrs Thatcher, has an image of society as an agglomeration of atomised individuals (or families). Such a conception, married to political power (particularly in the UK system of 'elected dictatorship'), is a powerful solvent of traditional notions of community. Accordingly it, and the social forces it mobilises, is resisted by the two long-established, but waning, classes with a strong communitarian vision. The traditional dominant class, the Tory wets with a paternalist model of community, and the traditional working class, with its conservative, egalitarian vision of community. The new social forces and the social vision they mobilise are genuinely radical and their exercise of power is unleashing 'gales of creative destruction' – breaking familiar social structures and making new.

Consider 'deregulation' of broadcasting in Italy. Before the Italian Constitutional Court's judgement 202 in 1976, broadcasting was the monopoly of the state agency, RAI. In turn the three television channels of RAI were the property of the three main Italian political parties, the Christian Democrats (RAI Uno), the Socialists (RAI Due) and the Communist party (RAI Tre) which installed their political clients in the offices of broadcaster. The commercial wave that flooded Italian broadcasting rapidly located established Italian media corporations as broadcasters. The publishing houses Rizzoli, Rosconi and Mondadori each ran television stations, although their interests have now declined and have been eclipsed by Silvio Berlusconi and his Fininvest holdings. Berlusconi was (and is) a builder, financier and property developer, not an intellectual, nor a client of a major political party, nor a member of the established Italian media élite (though there are suggestions that he was close to the notorious P2 freemasons' lodge). His presence, now dominant in Italian for-profit broadcasting, has added a new voice to the Italian media chorus. It is usually argued that Berlusconi is saying nothing new and that what he says is objectionable.

But the hypocrisy of the most prominent of Berlusconi's UK critics is worth comment. In September 1988 the UK commercial television company Television South (TVS) ran a display advertisement showing a

partly-dressed woman, purporting to be an Italian housewife, stripping on television and exemplifying the debasement of Italian television by unregulated commercial interests. TVS used the titillating image to attract attention while censuring Italian television for the same technique. It transpired that the woman shown in TVS's advertisement was neither Italian nor a housewife (though defined by TVS as both). Moreover, TVS is a co-production partner of the Berlusconi company ReteItalia and advertisements in the broadcasting trade press for its production *The Endless Game*, distributed jointly by TVS's daughter company Telso and Berlusconi's ReteItalia, juxtapose image and title of *The Endless Game* with another advertisement showing image and title of *Valentina – the Sexy Heroine of the 80s*. The Valentina advertisement shows a nubile woman semi-dressed in similar black underwear to that sported by the model in TVS' UK advertisements. So TVS, a business partner of Berlusconi, associates its products with just the kind of imagery and programming it purports to deplore.

One salutary lesson to be drawn from this example and from UK media coverage of the White Paper (and broadcasting policy in recent years) is the extent to which vested interests (very few major UK newspapers do not have an actual or potential financial interest in broadcasting, and broadcasters by definition have an interest) will use their command of the media to serve their institutional or personal interests – whether this entails the BBC and the Independent Television companies defending the status quo or the press conglomerates attacking it. Too often there is a selective appropriation of evidence to support an interested *parti pris* rather than an attempt to elucidate changing structural conditions.

The rise of Berlusconi television has increased the 'external' pluralism of the Italian media and exemplifies a structural change (which may be evaluated negatively or positively) from a broadcasting order nominally delivering 'internal' pluralism (a range of diverse programmes within a single channel or a few channels managed by state or para-statal organisation) to a situation where a plurality of channels each deliver strongly 'branded', single type of programming drawn from and transmitted by an augmented number of producers and broadcasters.

To judge whether the change from internal pluralism delivered by state or para-statal vertically-integrated broadcasters (transmitting programmes largely made in-house) to external pluralism delivered by broadcasters not owned, or not exclusively owned, and controlled by the state (transmitting programmes made out-of-house) is positive or negative requires an evaluation of broadcasting before (and after) the change. My iconoclastic advocacy of Berlusconi is, of course, polemical, but the case of Italian television does suggest that 'deregulation', even in the national instance usually cited to disparage it, has not been an unqualified disaster. The rampant clientism in RAI, its disdain for popular taste and the absence of external pluralism in Italian broadcasting have all been challenged and changed by Berlusconi's rise.

In the UK, the benefits and losses that attend the dissolution of the old forces by the new (as Brecht observed, the good old things are not always preferable to the bad new ones) are not as clear-cut as in Italy. But something of the same calculus is required. I was once privy to the railing of a former very senior official of the BBC against 'the Poujadist woman' and reflected that anyone who can make successful old Wykhamists fearful must have something to be said for her or him. The BBC has pre-eminently represented the good old things in UK broadcasting but the negative side of its communitarianism is more and more evident. Tom Burns' research¹² and a decade of vicarious experience of the difficulty talented polytechnic students experience in being accepted for jobs in the BBC testify to the weight the Corporation places on the intangible qualities possessed by members (even the rebel members) of the UK's traditional élites. Similarly, Jane Arthurs convincingly shows¹³ the absence of 'external pluralism' in the UK broadcasters' (including the BBC) under-representation of women in their personnel profiles – though independent television programme producers are by no means representative of the social composition of the UK. There is no doubt that the erosion of the boundary between broadcasting 'insiders' and 'outsiders' that has followed the Government's encouragement of independent production (first for Channel Four and latterly through the requirement that 25 per cent of ITV and BBC programmes be independently produced) has augmented 'external pluralism' in programme supply and entry to employment in broadcasting, and 'internal pluralism' in TV programmes' representation of previously excluded and invisible social groups. Here the Government's forced dissolution of the unitary, vertically-integrated system exemplified by the BBC and the ITV companies has been very positive. The White Paper promises to continue this process.

The communitarian ethos, for which public broadcasting in the UK has stood, excluded sections of the UK population from representation. In contrast the new model of atomised individuals does not assert so forcefully a normative and exclusive definition of community as that which has animated the discourse of the old paternalistic and egalitarian classes. Rather, its central notion of 'choice' asserts difference and advocated competition as an agency through which ossified norms may be dissolved. (This is not to deny that the new model mobilises its own systems of exclusion, nor that the old had its instances of openness.)

Examination of the history of broadcasting in the UK testifies to the productive influence of competition and the laggard pace of change and renewal of the established broadcasters. Whether protected by what Lord Reith called the 'brute force of monopoly'¹⁴ or in the 'comfortable duopoly' identified by Peacock.¹⁵ In the 1930s the Reithian Sunday held in place by the 'brute force of monopoly' was challenged by commercial radio from Luxembourg and France. Radio programming shifted as audiences were lost to the American Forces Networks (AFN) in the 1940s. The introduction of ITV in the 1950s was eloquently and

¹² Tom Burns, *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World*, London, Macmillan, 1977.

¹³ Jane Arthurs, 'Women, Technology and Television Production', a paper delivered to the International Television Studies Conference, London, 1988: see elsewhere in this issue.

¹⁴ JCW Reith, *Into the Wind*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949, p 99.

¹⁵ Alan Peacock, *op cit*, para 197.

¹⁶ Lord Reith, House of Lords Hansard, May 22, 1952. Cited in A Smith (ed), *British Broadcasting*, Newton Abbot, David and Charles, 1974.

¹⁷ H Pilkington (Chairman), *Report of the Committee on Broadcasting*, London, HMSO, 1962.

¹⁸ *ibid*, para 41.

¹⁹ Alan Peacock, *op cit*.

influentially anathematised by Reith (the echoes resound in many of the responses to *Broadcasting in the '90s*):

*Somebody introduced Christianity and printing and the uses of electricity. And somebody introduced smallpox, bubonic plague and the Black Death. Somebody is minded now to introduce sponsored broadcasting into this country.*¹⁶

Reith's alarm testifies to UK broadcasters' endemic fear of competition, a fear to which commercial television, the beneficiary of competition in the 1950s, now appeals by cloaking its monopoly prerogative to sell advertising in the costume of public service. The fear of competition is rationalised in terms of a conception of the audience (particularly for television) as uniquely vulnerable. The Pilkington Report¹⁷ commented that: 'the television audience is vulnerable to influence in a way that readers of newspapers and cinema audiences are not', and that: 'Sitting at home people are relaxed, less consciously critical and therefore more exposed'.¹⁸ From this notion of the audience follows the need for a protector, a Platonic Guardian required to regulate broadcasting in the audience's interest because the audience is unable to identify its own interests unaided. It is fascinating that the rationale for the British Board of Film Classification's stricter censorship of videocassettes than for cinema films is that the video audience in the home has *more* control over its viewing experience than does the cinema audience and can reconstruct its viewing experience (e.g. by replaying the naughty bits).

Whether the television audience is deemed to be active and in control or passive and vulnerable, there is a consistent thread in the UK broadcasting policy discourse before 1986 that demands the audience's viewing experience be controlled and directed. This tendency continues into the late 1980s as the establishment of a new censorship body, the Broadcasting Standards Council, and the prohibition of actuality coverage of the UDA and Sinn Féin demonstrate. But the discourse of authoritarian control of Platonic Guardianship is no longer articulated alone and important elements in the White Paper and the Government's agenda for change stem from a new conception of the audience.

Peacock and the robust consumer

In 1986 the *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, the Peacock Report¹⁹ was published. Peacock's conception of broadcasting is based on a robust consumer, better able to identify and act in her or his own interests than are the Guardians, who have been charged with protecting the public and its interests and who have controlled broadcasting policy in the UK to date. Indeed, Peacock views the established broadcasting authorities not only as less competent guarantors of viewers' and listeners' interests than viewers and listeners are themselves, but as

having been 'captured' by producers' interests. It is the broadcasters that the authorities tend to serve (in the UK broadcasting system there are only very fine distinctions between producers and authorities) more than they do consumers. The regulation of UK broadcasting is a process of preferring producer interests over those of consumers, of broadcasters over the public as taxpayers and as listeners and viewers.

The 'comfortable duopoly' of the BBC and IBA/ITV system exemplifies (as one of the leading members of the Peacock Committee, Samuel Brittan, stated) a class-stratified UK society divided into 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.²⁰ Accordingly for the Peacock Committee the goal of broadcasting policy (and social policy generally) is to break up the blocs of privilege, open institutions to entry by outsiders and make them more responsive to the general will of a public able to identify and act in its own interests and which has scant need of authorities. Peacock has been a powerful influence on the drafting of *Broadcasting in the '90s*, as the White Paper itself acknowledges. In particular Peacock's advocacy of consumer sovereignty and creation of a competitive market in broadcasting as the agency through which the interests of viewers and listeners are to be realised underpins recommendations such as regulation with a 'lighter touch' through an Independent Television Commission (ITC), the break-up of vertical integration in television, and the promotion of competition wherever possible. Yet Peacock is not the only influence on the White Paper, the repressive elements of which cannot be reconciled with Peacock's advocacy of consumer sovereignty and the recognition that, if governments are not to threaten free circulation of information, bodies such as the BBC need to be strong enough to challenge them. Rather, the White Paper is the resultant of a number of conflicting forces and will itself become the site on which struggles between the opposed forces will continue.

The struggle itself has all the characteristics of modern war: the forces are protean, alliances shift, the order of battle changes – flexibly articulating different arms in new combinations of offence and defence. Above all the fronts are fluid. In part it is a range war between the Home Office and Department of Trade and Industry for jurisdiction, in part a battle of ideas (the White Paper constitutes quality, diversity and popularity as the central values for broadcasting in the 1990s instead of the time-honoured 'inform, educate and entertain'; the new value being no less difficult to recognise and operationalise than the old) and in part a conflict of different material interests. The institutional, material and ideological forces are not precisely congruent so analysis of the course of the battle will vary depending on which force is most clearly observed. But the general character of the campaign reflects both the advantages of well-established defensive positions and the offensive power of new ideas. Thus the White Paper can be read either as a defence of public service broadcasting, preserving the BBC and Channel Four, or as a proposal for comprehensive change dedicated to the destruction of the public service element in UK broadcasting.

²⁰ See the *Financial Times*, November 20, 1986.

Important innovations canvassed in the White Paper are subscription finance for funding television (pay per view and/or pay per channel) and changes in the regulation of commercial television in order to foster competition and replace regulated monopoly by a more freely functioning market. The proposal for subscription finance follows suggestions made in the Peacock Report (and the successful establishment of the French Canal Plus service). Peacock was attracted to subscription finance for the potential improvement in information flows between consumers (viewers) and producers (broadcasters). Subscription finance, especially pay per view, offers the opportunity of using price as a signalling system to express the desires, and intensity of desires, of consumers for particular programmes or bundles of programmes. Other funding mechanisms (whether advertising, licence fee or state budget) offer inferior signalling systems (whatever their merits as funding systems). In advertising-financed broadcasting the broadcaster responds to signals from advertisers not from audiences, while licence fee or state budget finance for broadcasting has broadcasters responding to signals from the funding source, ultimately government, and similarly estranges consumers, viewers and listeners, from broadcasters. Accordingly the White Paper states:

*The Government looks forward to the eventual replacement of the licence fee. . . . The Government intends to encourage the progressive introduction of subscription on the BBC's television services.*²¹

²¹ *Broadcasting in the '90s*, op cit, para 3.10.

²² Home Office, *Subscription Television*, London, HMSO, 1987.

²³ Alan Peacock, op cit, para 577.

²⁴ *Subscription Television*, op cit, p 128.

²⁵ *ibid*, p 126.

²⁶ 'Television Tomorrow' paper at the International Institute of Communication conference, Edinburgh, 1986; revised version in *Intermedia*, vol 14 no 6, 1986, pp 35-37.

However, the White Paper also notes that the subscription television study commissioned by the Home Office²² observed that subscription funding, though potentially offering a programme menu better tuned to consumer demand than the existing producer-driven menu (Peacock commented acerbically that 'the viewer's or listener's main function is to react to a set of choices determined by the broadcasting institutions'²³, would also *reduce* consumer welfare by excluding existing viewers who paid the licence fee and used the BBC's services but would not be able or willing to pay subscription fees. The study observed: 'Even BBC2 is only viable at price levels which result in a large part of the audience being excluded from the market.'²⁴

In fact the study goes further and points out that licence fee funding is an efficient means of financing broadcasting and that:

*There is no price level (and corresponding audience size) for which either BBC1 or BBC2 can recoup enough revenue from the market to finance the channel at the current expenditure level.*²⁵

As Professor Peacock himself has observed²⁶, a *table d'hôte* programme menu may be preferred to an *à la carte* menu for its lower cost in spite of its inferior sensitivity to consumer demand.

The subscription funding proposal for the BBC exemplifies a number

of characteristics of the White Paper: accurate diagnosis of a neglected problem, but prescription of a cure that may well be worse than the disease. Consequently there is uncertainty not only about the colour of the edges of *Broadcasting in the '90s* (white or green) but about the level of commitment of political centres (the Home Office, the Department of Trade and Industry and Downing Street) to particular regimes of treatment and, most important, therefore uncertainty about the prognosis for UK broadcasting: remission, cure or decline.

It is quite possible that Government will seek reduction of the 'insulation of the BBC from its customers and from market disciplines'²⁷ by other means than subscription finance because of the welfare losses that are entailed therein. But whether or not subscription finance is chosen as the instrument through which efficiency and responsiveness to audiences are achieved will depend, as always, on the vigour of resistance and the extent to which the arguments of 'Subscription Television' are rehearsed rather than the recommendations contained in the White Paper. The latter follow the authors' sense of their clients' political agenda rather than the logic of their analysis.

The White Paper proposes more changes to the for-profit sector of UK broadcasting than to the not-for-profit sector. The three not-for-profit TV channels of the BBC and Channel Four are to experience changes in funding (though even that is not certain in the case of the BBC), but the BBC's radio services (though challenged for the first time by domestic national commercial competition) will remain substantially unchanged. BBC Television will be subjected to pressures to increase the efficiency of its resource utilisation and to increase 'external pluralism', the proportion of programmes screened that are made out-of-house, but (except for the proposals for subscription finance which are by no means certain to be implemented) remains otherwise substantially unchanged. Channel Four is fulsomely praised, but (in one of the sections of *Broadcasting in the '90s* with greenest edges), new proposals for its funding are canvassed, including one by Channel Four's Chairman for the channel to sell its own advertising. The requirement for a new funding mechanism for Channel Four is a consequence of the White Paper's abolition of the channel's current owner, the IBA, and dramatic changes to its funder, the ITV system.

The most important changes proposed in the White Paper are those concerning for-profit broadcasting, the ITV companies and their regulator, the IBA. Here the aim to augment consumer sovereignty and improve the signalling system between consumers and producers (through creation of a market between broadcasters and viewers and listeners) is joined by concern about the cost and wastefulness of UK commercial television and its regulation. The changes proposed for commercial broadcasting will do little to improve its responsiveness to audience demand or to augment 'consumer sovereignty'. But the creation of an efficient signalling system (whether through prices in a market or new political institutions and systems of accountability)

²⁷ *Broadcasting in the '90s*, op cit, para 3.13.

between audiences and broadcasters is an intractable problem. Terrestrial broadcasting is very cheap but its low cost goes hand in hand with a lack of feedback from consumers to producers. To improve feedback raises costs, thus an inescapable dilemma in broadcasting policy is a choice between cheap *table d'hôte* or expensive *à la carte* programme diets. The Government's choice is clear: cheap service provision at the expense of imperfect responsiveness to consumers – the reverse of the Peacock Committee's recommendation.

The role of Advertising

The White Paper's proposed changes to commercial broadcasting and its regulation address the Peacock Committee's concerns about the absence of competitive markets for advertising, for programme supply and for access to radio frequency spectrum. The proposals are directed to improving (or establishing) competition in those markets in the belief that gains in efficiency will follow. In programme production, supply of advertising and access to spectrum, the agenda established in the White Paper is augmentation of competition, and challenge to established monopolies, with a particular concern to reduce broadcasting costs.

Prima facie there is cause for concern about ITV's cost structure. Industry sources estimate that the cost of producing a television programme in Australia is about 60 per cent of the cost of UK production. The Australian cost advantage is amplified by the Australian government's programme of production subsidy (170 million Australian dollars per annum from 1989 to 1990 spread between feature films, TV drama and documentaries). If UK costs of production remain higher than those in Australia, programme production will tend to leak away from the former to the latter. Cost of production is not the only factor affecting location decisions (US production costs are higher than UK costs), but it is significant and a legitimate concern of public policy. The concern to drive down production costs and erode barriers between insiders and outsiders underlies Government's consistent support for independent producers.

The White Paper's proposed elimination of the ITV companies' monopoly of supply of television advertising reflects the successful lobbying of the advertising industry. Establishment of a terrestrially broadcast Channel Five (and perhaps Channel Six), decoupling of sale of advertising on Channel Four from Channel Three and establishment of satellite television channels will give advertisers alternative suppliers of television advertising time. But advertisers will not necessarily experience a decline in their costs of reaching a thousand viewers because the audience will be fragmented between a greater plurality of channels than now exists. They are likely to have to purchase more advertising time (albeit at a lower cost per minute) in order to reach the desired population of viewers.

The core of the White Paper's proposals is monopoly busting in commercial television through creation of markets and the use of competition. Hitherto commercial television policy in the UK has granted for-profit companies monopoly rights in the exploitation of a public asset, the radio spectrum, and has exacted from franchisees benefits that putatively accrue to the public in exchange for a monopoly to sell television advertising. The return to the public is of two kinds: programmes of a range and quality that the public would not otherwise enjoy and a financial return to the Treasury as payment for monopoly privileges not ordinarily enjoyed by capitalists. The Independent Broadcasting Authority is the trustee for the public, charged with ensuring that an equitable bargain is struck and that the public receives a proper return in exchange for the monopoly it grants to the ITV companies.

Evaluation of the changes in the organisation and regulation of for-profit television proposed in the White Paper demands assessment of the existing institutions and their performance. How far have the benefits in cash and in kind that the IBA is charged to realise for the public been delivered? We must consider not only whether a new set of principles is worse, or better, in the abstract, or whether deregulation is to be preferred to regulation, but also the practice of regulation itself. A good theory of regulation will beat an imperfect actual market any time just as a good, internally coherent, theory of markets will beat an actual imperfect practice of regulation.

Such comparisons have indicative value (though it is important to recognise that like is not being compared with like) and establish at least that the IBA is a relatively expensive regulator. It still remains to be assessed whether the IBA is worth it. Does it deliver benefits that would not otherwise be enjoyed sufficient to compensate for its costs?

The UK public receives a financial return from ITV for its exploitation of the radio spectrum via the Exchequer Levy. The Levy (as the 'additional payments' referred to in Section 33[4] of the Broadcasting Act 1981 are usually known) is paid to the IBA and levied on the ITV companies' profits. In 1986-87 and 1987-88 the return to the Exchequer from the Levy declined by 19 million pounds per annum from the level achieved in 1985-86 following a change in the basis on which Levy was calculated.

The change – from 66.7 per cent of profits that exceeded 650,000 pounds or 2.8 per cent of net advertising revenue (NAR) to 45 per cent on NAR and 22.5 per cent on profits from overseas programme sales – was designed to capture benefits that were escaping the Exchequer because of the way in which the ITV companies were organising their financial affairs. The Levy on profits from NAR gave ITV companies an incentive to load costs (and thus reduce profits and liability to Levy) on their UK operations including programme production. By doing so ITV companies were able to reduce or avoid their liability to Levy. In 1982-83 Thames Television paid no Levy but made (unleviable) profits of 5.78 million pounds in overseas programme sales. In the same year

Granada Television with a lower NAR than Thames (and overseas programme sales profit of 282,000 pounds) paid 5.38 million pounds in Levy.

The incentives in such a taxation regime to load costs on to domestic activities and take profits in overseas programme sales are obvious. In subsequent years Granada embarked on a very costly programme of drama production and successfully reduced its liability to Levy. In order to capture the revenue lost to the Exchequer by such strategies the basis of assessment of Levy was recalculated (following the advice of the IBA), but the recalculation resulted in a *reduction* of revenue of 19 million pounds per annum. In early 1988 the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee took the IBA to task for a loss of 38 million pounds to the Consolidated Fund that followed the changed basis of Levy calculation, which in turn was based on the IBA's expert advice. The Director General of the IBA regretted the shortfall and argued that the IBA had expected the result of the Levy recalculation to be broadly neutral and revealed that the Authority had reached its conclusion after consultation with the ITV companies.

The Levy debacle clearly influenced MPs on the Public Accounts Committee (the most important and influential of Parliamentary Committees) and fuelled Parliamentary sentiment that was already hostile to the IBA. In December 1988 the Government announced a further recalculation of Levy which, from January 1990, will be calculated on a basis of 75 per cent of advertising revenue and 25 per cent of profits. The new Levy is likely to cut ITV profits by 20 per cent.

Markets, political control and the middle term between them, regulation, are all dangerously imperfect. The broadcasting market, because of the peculiar economic features of broadcasting and its 'public good' characteristics,²⁸ is particularly imperfect. But so too are political systems. First-past-the-post voting systems are imperfect representations of citizens' preferences, but even these are far more sensitive to public preference than the modes of control and allocation that distinguish broadcasting in Britain. Public sector institutions of the type that characterise European public broadcasting are very vulnerable to political clientism, élite capture and to being run by insiders to express their own values and interests rather than those of the public (or 'publics') that consumes the broadcasters' output. Regulatory institutions (and regulators) are also prone to 'capture' by the industries and interests which they are there to regulate, and come to identify the interests of the regulated sector with those of the public as a whole. They, too, exemplify the phenomenon of élite capture.

Having indicated above some of the difficulties in identifying programme quality (and diversity), I shall consider the financial benefits realised by the IBA for the public, for whom it acts as trustee, in exchange for the monopoly granted to the ITV companies. Cash is always easier to discuss than value.

Discussion of finance has been neglected in the past (and prior to the

²⁸ See inter alia the discussion of 'free riding' in Alan Peacock, *op cit*, p 29.

White Paper) debate: the financial return to the public is only one of the bases on which the UK broadcasting system and its regulation should be evaluated. The most obvious characteristic of broadcasting regulation in the UK is its cost. The IBA is very expensive. In 1987-88 it employed 1,378 staff of whom 956 were engineers. If the engineers are removed from consideration there are 422 regulators who:

- (1) Select ITV and ILR contractors,
- (2) Supervise programmes,
- (3) Control advertising.

If engineering and transmission costs are removed from consideration, 422 people discharging these three functions cost 24.7 million pounds per year for television and two million pounds for radio (but note that these calculations are far from perfect for the IBA annual report, on which I have drawn for data, states that some costs and revenues are not readily apportionable²⁹. The IBA's annual expenditure on regulation is 29.4 million pounds. It generates 2.6 million pounds in revenue (other than from ITV and ILR) of which one million is for facilities. If we assume that regulators earn 1.6 million pounds and that portion of revenue is deducted from the 29.4 million, we are left with a net cost of regulation of 27.8 million pounds for the year 1987-88.

In terms of international comparison the IBA seems costly. But because there are few regulators occupying the IBA's intermediate position between government and industry, and those that do (concentrated in anglophone states) are charged with a different repertoire of tasks to those discharged by the IBA, comparisons are imperfect. Nonetheless there are significant cost disparities. The Canadian Radio Television and Telecommunication Commission regulates telecommunications and cable as well as broadcasting. It holds public hearings across Canada and, apart from its telecommunications responsibilities, regulates 4,983 cable and broadcasting undertakings. It costs (using figures for 1987-88 and converting Canadian dollars at 2.16: £1) 13.15 million dollars per annum. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (using figures for 1985-86) and converting Australian dollars at 2.16: £1) regulates 205 radio stations and fifty commercial television stations and costs 3.38 million pounds. The United States Federal Communications Commission (1985) was almost twice as costly as the IBA (54.23 million pounds converting US dollars at 1.76: £1) but, like the CRTC, regulates telecommunications as well as broadcasting and exercises authority over 12,258 radio and television broadcasters.

Granada's changed financial strategy after 1982-83 demonstrates clearly the dynamics of UK commercial television which either delivers a financial return to the Exchequer or programme 'quality' (to assume that *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *Jewel in the Crown* constitute quality programmes), but rarely both. Why, then, pay more than 27 million pounds per annum for the IBA, a regulator that cannot contrive a broadcasting regime to deliver both quality and a financial return (and the advice of which has led to a loss of 38 million

²⁹ Independent Broadcasting Authority, *Annual Report 1987-88*, London 1988, p 10.

³⁰ See the *Financial Times*, February 6, 1989, p 9.

pounds to the Consolidated Fund)? The proposals in the White Paper to allocate commercial television franchises to the highest bidder promise to realise a financial return to the Exchequer more cheaply. A regulator is only worth financing if it can deliver benefit otherwise unattainable (in this case both programme quality and a financial return for monopoly rights). The IBA has not done so. Not only has the IBA's advice and administration resulted in decline in revenue (though the benefit in kind of a *Brideshead Revisited* do need to be weighed against the losses in cash) but nor has it established a common basis for attributing costs and hence establishing levyable profits among the television companies it regulates. An examination of the accounts of the ITV companies reveals that some companies depreciate freehold land while others do not. It is questionable whether freehold land does depreciate and therefore whether it is a properly allowable cost, but if it is assumed to be a legitimate cost why do some ITV companies account for it and others not? (London Weekend Television and Yorkshire TV depreciate freehold land at 2 per cent per annum, Anglia, Granada and Border not at all, Scottish Television over eleven to fifty years.)

The 'deregulatory' proposal canvassed in the White Paper to allocate commercial television franchises to the highest bidder (and to reregulate by abolishing the IBA and the Cable Authority and establish an Independent Television Commission) follows the IBA's failure to realise for the public benefits both in cash and in kind and to establish a common basis of cost allocation among the television companies it regulates. The franchise auction promises to realise a financial return more effectively and at lower cost than has the IBA. The Peacock Committee unanimously recommended (in its response to the White Paper) that the ITC should be able to reject the highest bidder in a franchise auction if it believed another bid better served the public interest.³⁰ There are grounds for doubt about the auction's ability to deliver programme 'quality' (whatever that is) and about the cost of the ITC, but the IBA does not have an unassailable record on those scores.

Conclusion

Comprehensive evaluation of the White Paper is premature. It is best perceived as setting an agenda for discussion with, in some areas, very firm Government setting of the agenda, in others a more tentative approach. Assessment of the Government's agenda entails evaluation of the established broadcasting order and, in particular, the ITV system and its regulation. For it is on the for-profit sector of television that proposed changes are focused, and there are good reasons for change to this sector.

The prospect of cheaper regulation, an end to monopoly in the supply of television advertising, an increase in external pluralism (through establishment of Channel Five and programme sourcing from indepen-

dent producers) is as welcome as reduction in ITV's costs is necessary. Justification for the existing ITV/IBA system comes from its imputed delivery of programme diversity and quality. These are very difficult categories to analyse but it is apparent that insufficient diversity and quality have been delivered by ITV to justify continuation of the present commercial television regime. Whether the new regime that will follow the Broadcasting Act will do better remains to be seen.

It seems clear that there will be an increase in 'external diversity', but less clear whether 'internal diversity' and/or programme quality will change, whether for better or worse. The agenda set by the White Paper presents considerable opportunities for improvement in UK broadcasting. Many of these will go by default if the green edges of the White Paper are misrecognised as black edges and interpreted as a coherent Government broadcasting policy aimed at weakening or eliminating 'intermediate institutions' and augmenting the repressive powers of the state.

Certainly the repressive powers of the state *are* being augmented – if only the agenda were deregulation and not creation of more onerous regulation – with the reintroduction of the censorious inquisition of a new and ridiculous Lord Chamberlain in the guise of Lord Mogg of Video and the iniquitous prohibition of the representation of lawful political organisations. The terms of the debate are now set by Peacock's conception of the audience as robust rather than vulnerable, able to recognise its own interests rather than requiring protection for its weakness and vulnerability. The problem of inventing institutional forms through which the audience can exercise sovereignty has not been solved in *Broadcasting in the '90s*, nor will it be through the welfare reducing instrument of subscription television.

But the opportunities presented for realising audience sovereignty through new political institutions and mechanisms of accountability should not be foregone because of a justifiable alarm at the growth in Government powers of censorship and the less justifiable desire to see the conspiratorial hand of the puppeteer of Downing Street exercising its subtle sway in a coherent broadcasting policy. There is no coherence in *Broadcasting in the '90s*. For that reason it contains promises as well as threats. The benefits of a change in regulation of commercial broadcasting, increase in external pluralism, pressure on the 'comfortable duopoly' and a change in the basis on which broadcasting policy is discussed should not be foregone because the good old things are preferred to the bad new ones.

I owe much of my knowledge of Italian television policy to discussions with Philip Schlesinger and Jay Stuart; I am grateful to them both for telling me many things I did not formerly know. They are not responsible for my interpretation of the information which they generously provided.

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE ON THE LABOUR FORCE IN BRITISH TELEVISION

BY COLIN SPARKS

¹ Interview with A
Lennon conducted by
the author, April 25,
1988.

THE LAST COUPLE of years have seen a series of conflicts in the British television industry involving the managements of TV broadcasting companies and various trade unions. The Government, through its pressure for an increased quota of independent productions, its reference of the broadcasting collective agreements to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC), and in the Prime Minister's September 1987 injunction to the industry leaders that TV is 'the last bastion of restrictive practices', has been a keen participant in these disputes. In this article I shall address three related questions:

- (1) What are the causes of the current conflicts, both immediately and in the longer term?
- (2) What are the probable implications of the conflicts for the labour force in British TV?
- (3) What are the broader implications of these conflicts?

The answer to the first of these questions is, at least on the surface, very simple indeed: there are long-term shifts in the technical and political framework of television which have major implications for the size and nature of the work-force. Since at least 1984, the management in both the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the network Independent Television (ITV) companies have been on the offensive over staffing levels, conditions of employment and control over key appointments. In the case of the BBC, the offensive began when, in 1985, the then Deputy Director General Michael Checkland produced his 'Priorities for the Future'. The consequence has been a long and relatively undramatic erosion of jobs and conditions.¹ None of these developments has led to a major confrontation with the main BBC union, the Broadcasting and Entertainment Trades Association (BETA), but more recently, the pace has quickened and the possibility of a dispute has come much nearer. In November 1988 the BBC announced that it planned to save seven million pounds in the next financial year, at a cost of 217 jobs. BETA is, at the time of writing, considering industrial action, particularly since the management have

made it clear that this is merely the first of a series of sharp reductions.²

The BBC, however, is not the main battleground. BETA is a relatively weak union, hardly emancipated from its past as a staff association and levels of organisation, pay and conditions in the BBC have as a result always been much worse than in the commercial sector. Here the various managements have faced more entrenched organisation, particularly in the case of the Electrical Electronic Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU) and Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT). The long lock-out of ACTT members at TV-AM is the best-known instance of a major confrontation, and it has been argued by those closely involved on the union side that, despite the evident eccentricity of Bruce Gynge, his strategy of cutting jobs and conditions had been in place ever since he took over.³ There is also substantial evidence of a long-term management offensive in other ITV companies.

In August 1987 Roy Lockett, Deputy General Secretary of the ACTT, was pointing to 'a significant number of disputes' in ITV.⁴ As long ago as November 1985, Anglia Television reached an agreement after three years of negotiations with the ACTT which merged the film and electronic shops, allowed the introduction of electronic equipment operated with reduced crewing levels in all areas of production and other productivity gains.⁵ Thames Television has been actively seeking major changes since 1984 and some progress has been made. Its threat to contract out the production of the police series, *The Bill*, unless the unions agreed to changes in working practices which would reduce costs was made in November 1987.⁶ Granada has already lost around 200 jobs and has offered a further 270 staff voluntary severance. In Scottish Television (STV), the unions agreed to the document, *The Way Ahead*, presented in early November 1987, in which, in return for no redundancies they agreed to the abolition of minimum crews, a blurring of demarcation lines and a joint commitment to changes in working practices. Colin Waters, Controller of Personnel and Industrial Relations for STV, said: 'Any television company with an understanding of its future must be in negotiations like this to meet future competition'.⁷ Tyne Tees Television, currently the most 'hawkish' of the contractors, made its first major deal on new working practices after a dispute with BETA in 1985. At Television South-West (TVSW) talks have already been going on for a year. Ulster Television has reached a deal involving an ending of restrictive practices, a change in overtime payments and an agreement on flexibility in return for a wage rise.⁸ The recent well-publicised decisions of London Weekend Television (LWT) to seek 239 redundancies, of Tyne-Tees Television to leave the national agreement between the ACTT and the TV companies, and of other managements to seek to revise those clauses excluding local deals are thus very much part of a wider and longer offensive on wages, staffing and conditions. According to J Calvert, Director of Industrial Relations for the ITV Association, the meaning of the companies decisions in April 1988 was:

² Anon, 'BETA to Fight Cuts', *Broadcast*, November 25, 1988, p 1.

³ R T Simon, 'Dear Mr Gynge . . .', an Open Letter in *Broadcast*, April 8, 1988, p 18; Anon, 'Rosy Outlook for the Pink Panther of Camden Lock', the *Sunday Times*, December 13, 1987.

⁴ C Leadbeater, 'Labour Relations Chief Quits TV Company', the *Financial Times*, November 7, 1985.

⁵ H Haigh, 'Radical TV Deal Ends Demarcation Lines', the *Financial Times*, November 7, 1985.

⁶ R Snoddy and J Gapper, 'Thames TV Warns Union that Costs Must Be Cut', the *Financial Times*, March 5, 1988.

⁷ Quoted in J Gapper, 'STV Plans Change in Working Practices', the *Financial Times*, November 11, 1987.

⁸ S Moncrief, 'ITV: Trying to Make Practices Perfect', *Broadcast*, March 31, 1988, p 2.

⁹ Anon, 'Tyne Tees Isolated on Union Dealings', *Broadcast*, April 15, 1988, p 1.

¹⁰ H Lee, 'Thames to Make Big Savings', *Broadcast*, November 25, 1988, p 1.

*The recommendations to be put to the unions next week are aimed at accelerating the process of decentralising negotiations and putting more responsibilities for industrial relations at a company level, to enable companies to make the changes they feel necessary.*⁹

There is no sign that any management intends to slacken the pace. In November 1988, Thames TV announced thirty-two redundancies as part of a package designed to save 500,000 pounds.¹⁰

Behind these struggles are longer-term forces, which are of two kinds: technical and politico-economic. Most of the attention to technical factors in the last few years has been concentrated upon the changing technologies of distribution, particularly upon the ability of cable and satellite transmission to both segment the TV audience and to decouple it from its traditional close correspondence with the boundaries of nation states. I do not intend to rehearse those arguments at length since they are quite familiar. Rather I want to point out that they allow, in principle, the transmission of the same programme to an ever-larger audience as well as the much more often noted possibility of increasing the number of available programmes. They thus contain the potential of shifting the balance of TV production from 'variable' (wages) to 'fixed' (plant) capital and, with it, the possibility of more intense exploitation of the labour force. At the same time, they require a much larger initial investment in the means of distribution than hitherto, which must also be entirely in place before any form of broadcasting can occur.

The second, and less remarked-upon, development concerns the changes taking place in the technology of production. Some of these are 'indeterminate' with regard to the rate of exploitation: the replacement of film by electronic cameras, or of film by video in the editing suite, do not in themselves mean either a change in the size of the labour force or its membership. The large-size crews operating with conventional film equipment which have been prominent features of British TV production were not necessitated by the nature of that equipment: there is, after all, a school of documentary film-making, exemplified by the work of Roger Graef, which has always produced highly-regarded results with very much smaller crews than the norm. The large crews used in most TV productions were thus primarily the result of union strength in collective bargaining, using technical issues as one of their counters, rather than the necessary consequence of the technology. But the fact that modern electronic cameras are lighter than previous models and that they can combine picture and sound recording in one unit, or that the function of camera-loader is rendered obsolete by the shift from film to electronic recording, does not in itself dictate the need for fewer technicians. These developments might make it harder for the unions to produce technical arguments to support their negotiating position, but in the end the level of staffing will be determined by the relative strengths of the bargaining parties.

The introduction of electronic recording devices into, say, television

drama, provides the possibility of reduced costs, but these need not necessarily arise from reduced staffing levels.¹¹ The same applies to the use of electronic editing, which involves a change in technical process which can be relearned relatively easily by a film editor.¹² However, the shift towards electronic technology and the ever-increasing use of computing in the production of TV programmes does contain within itself a drive to replace human beings with machines. The clearest example so far is the introduction of remote-controlled cameras in the studios, which has progressed some way in news and current affairs in the US:

*The de-manning of US TV is well under way. With a studio camera-man earning \$80,000 a year, NBC means to make considerable man-power savings on the new [remotely-controlled] cameras. CBS recently sacked 210 staff in order to cut \$30m from its \$300 million budget . . . In the race in America to keep up with the challenge from cable and satellite services, network station managers are desperately seeking new technology and schemes to cut back on ever more technicians.*¹³

This represents a new and different kind of development which corresponds much more exactly to the normal processes of capitalist production in which the introduction of new machinery is designed explicitly to reduce labour inputs in order to secure competitive advantages.

One consequence of this is that we need to modify the place given to 'Baumol's disease' characterised by Collins, Garnham and Locksley as:

*The possibilities of exploiting the productivity advantages of capital investment in labour-saving technology in the production of a TV programme is strictly limited . . . The general real level of prices and wages in the economy is determined by increases in productivity in the capital intensive sectors. As a result there is an inexorable tendency for the real costs of cultural production to rise.*¹⁴

Until the introduction of computer-control into various aspects of the production process there was little scope for such investment. The making of TV programmes depended on irreducible labour inputs in much the same way as easel painting. Clearly, the introduction of remote-controlled or pre-programmed cameras does not shift the industry overnight on to the same basis as car production, but it is a new development. (This shift in the technical possibilities of production is crucially different from that in mass-production industries such as car-making in that the other aspect identified by Baumol, the dependence on the more or less continuous production of prototypes, continues to operate. It is therefore a debatable question as to how far an innovation which has been introduced into the highly formulaic area of news production can be extended to other areas of TV production and, if so, what implications it will have for the forms of TV.) In the longer term, the general evidence from industry is that a process of technical innovation in the application of electronic devices to production is

¹¹ W Pannifer, 'Exploding the Myth', *Invision* no 20, March 1988, pp 21-22.

¹² J Ashton, 'Skinning the Sausage Machine', *Invision*, no 16, October, 1987, p 5.

¹³ S Wright, 'The Shape of Things to Come', *Broadcast*, April 15, 1988, p 15.

¹⁴ N Garnham in R Collins, N Garnham and G Locksley, *The Economics of UK Television*, London, CCIS, 1987, p 30.

¹⁵ J Harbord, 'Europe Pops the Question', *Invision* no 15, September, 1987, p 16.

unlikely to be arrested at the first stage and will tend to be generalised so far as is technically, commercially and socially possible.

In and of themselves, however, none of these technical innovations needs to point to the sort of confrontation between management and unions currently taking place. In some circumstances it is unprofitable for employers to introduce technical innovations and, in others, unions prove strong enough to resist machinery which they believe will have an adverse effect on their members. The decisive factors here are the economic and political frameworks within which innovations are received. Again, these are well known and I will only rehearse their more obvious elements.

The most apparent of these is that the new technologies of distribution create for the first time, outside a number of small countries with unique geographical locations, the prospect of a broadcast audience wider than the boundaries of the nation state. In one sense this creates the possibility for the construction of very large audiences for economic regions, most notably the European Economic Community (EEC), which have previously been too small, too fragmented and too poor to sustain programme production on the scale of the US networks. Clearly, even with the types of programming which have a wide appeal across national and linguistic boundaries, and which have proved themselves highly effective in the US market, the existence of a guaranteed distribution is neither the same thing as a large audience or a large profit. The example of musical television is exemplary here. In the form of MTV this has been one of the major broadcasting successes of the last decade in the US, although there is some evidence of a falling off in audiences. In Europe, on the other hand, the MTV launch comes on the back of two previous music channels which were hardly successes and even with this well-tried product the chances of success are not rated all that highly by industry commentators:

*The problem is that when you are trying to attract advertising you are selling an audience, and when you are selling a specialised channel, such as a non-stop music channel, you are automatically narrowing the audience.*¹⁵

None of these uncertainties of audience and revenue has deterred the major international media conglomerates headed by the likes of Rupert Murdoch or Robert Maxwell from attempting to enter the market, but it is clear that the existence of large-scale satellite broadcasting offering specialised programming matches very closely an attack on traditional public service broadcasting institutions. Unless the new programmes can find significant new audiences to sell to advertisers, they are forced to attempt to resegment the existing audiences currently catered for by the older institutions. However, it is also obvious from audience rating figures that, at least in the case of Britain, audience tastes are very much for home-grown programmes of reasonable quality. Occasionally they will prefer a US-originated programme or, increasingly, an Australian

one, but on a daily basis they like British material. That taste can, of course, be broken, particularly if the quality of the programming provided by the existing suppliers falls drastically. The aim of the proponents of deregulation is not simply to gain the right to broadcast but also to pressurise nation states into ensuring that they can compete with existing organisations, by means of fragmenting their structures, limiting their competitive advantages and forcing them into situations in which they have no option but to reduce programme quality. Consequently, there is a powerful lobby from outside the existing broadcasting establishment which wants their position weakened.

On the other hand, there are a number of lesser organisations and companies, ranging from the fairly large to the small and formerly radical, which want part of the profits to be made from the break-up of the broadcasters' effective monopoly of TV production. Some of these companies have very large ambitions, for example, Virgin:

*Branson himself makes no secret of his desire to use the company's niche as a launching pad from which to overtake all its broadcasting partners in size and power by creating the sort of global media empire that would be the object of those faraway gazes in the eyes of Messrs Murdoch and Maxwell.*¹⁶

In particular, there is a rapid process of concentration and centralisation of capital going on in the area of facilities houses, in which Virgin Vision is a major and self-conscious participant.¹⁷ The likely outcome was described by a recent victim of the tendency towards merger in the following sour tones:

*With the much talked about '25 per cent' already starting to benefit the independent producers, I fear the likely outcome will not be the solid growth of the vital infra-structure needed to support a growing industry. Instead it will provide rich pickings for the take-over brigade.*¹⁸

The medium-sized companies which will result from this process are ones that will not themselves have direct access to broadcasting outlets for their products. Their normal situation will be one in which they have to bid to the major broadcasters in order to make programmes.¹⁹

An additional source of pressure comes from the advertising industry, which has long wanted to break the ITV monopoly on broadcast advertising. Advertisers point to the fact that such exposure is more expensive in Britain than elsewhere in the developed world and, for example, could be re-distributed to provide a wider range of channels.²⁰

Consequently, the ITV companies and the BBC find themselves in a new situation. It is true that the actions of the present Government, from the Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC (1986) through to the proposed auction of the franchises, have exacerbated the pressures exerted by these economic developments. But it is wrong to imagine they are motivated solely by lofty ideological concerns: there are capitalists of all shapes and sizes egging them on to break up the

¹⁶ D Housham, 'Virgin's Man of Vision', *Invision*, no 11, April, 1987, p 24.

¹⁷ S Moncrief, 'Facilities Bites the Bullet', *Broadcast*, March 25, 1988, pp 16-17.

¹⁸ D Slaymaker, 'Time to Question Our Motives', *Invision*, no 18, December, 1987, p 4.

¹⁹ There is, of course, an expansion of new, non-broadcast markets in which many of these companies are heavily involved. These have always operated on the basis of much lower labour costs than those specified under the TV agreements so, in this sense, many of these new companies come with a different 'managerial culture' than the norm in the broadcasting companies: Virgin, on a more general front, is an example of this.

²⁰ R Snoddy, 'TV Advertising Costs in the Spotlight', the *Financial Times*, April 19, 1988.

²¹ B Jones, R Owens and N Reed, *Leisure Letter*, London, Kitcat and Aitken, 1987, p 9. (Emphasis, punctuation and grammar as in the original.)

²² N Fraser, 'Crisis in Commercial TV', *Broadcast*, March 31, 1988, p 16.

²³ R Snoddy, 'The Hammer Hangs Over Broadcasting', the *Financial Times*, March 5, 1988.

²⁴ Quoted in J Harbord, 'Independence Movement', *Invision*, no 13, June, 1987, p 21.

²⁵ Editorial, 'Time for TV to Compete', the *Financial Times*, March 14, 1988; Anon, 'Independent Television: The Price is Right', *The Economist*, March 12, 1988, p 33.

'comfortable duopoly'. The conclusion of one stockbrokerage research group advising clients on leisure investment put the result of this clearly:

On a longer-term view, it is evident that the ITV contractors must take on the unions in the sense of overmanning, significant overtime payments etc. It is quite possible that, given the present political scenario, the ITV companies could now take-on, and beat, the unions, without any real decline in their audience figures or advertising revenue. As part of this general situation, the question of independent producers i.e. an imposed 25 per cent quota, is quite interesting, on the issues that, if this is Government policy, it really does not matter too much if formal agreement is reached between the ITV companies and the independents – the concept has to be which companies can cut their production overheads, buy in productions from outside cheaper, and rent out their studio facilities to independent producers.²¹

At every level, these developments mean an attack on the jobs, pay and working conditions of union members in the broadcasting industry. All commentators are quite clear as to these implications. Irrespective of the outcome of current Government initiatives, the ITV companies have already been using the development of the independents to shed staff and force down wages.²² Both the BBC and the ITV companies will, if they are not to carry the financial burdens of their existing studios and facilities on a production load reduced by 25 per cent, have to succeed in attracting some of the business that independent productions will generate. This, it is quite clear, will only be possible on the basis of greatly reduced costs. The independent production company, Broadcast Communications, produces Channel Four's *Business Daily* programme with about half the staffing levels that operate even in the BBC.²³ David Graham, Managing Director of another independent company, Diverse Productions, states flatly that:

We've got to have the same facilities as the in-house productions have and they've got to be at a competitive price. We're not going to suffer union agreements which mean overmanning and extortionate prices just because that is what the companies have negotiated with their staff.²⁴

The same problems apply to the prospects of employment which would result from the proposal to auction the franchises, in which the reduction of wage costs will constitute an important advantage to which commentators are already pointing.²⁵ Overall, the picture for the labour force if the employers and the Government get their way is of increased exploitation and increasing casualisation.

It is not an accident that many of the names which appear in this context are ones which have emerged through the activities of Channel Four. That has, in many ways, been the laboratory for the new sorts of working practices. Charles Thompson, a prominent independent producer, records:

I know of directors who have undertaken projects for Channel Four without payment because they saw it as a way on to the screen. I'm against this because it means broadcasters can continue to keep fees down because they know there are always companies who are willing to undercut the going price. Good housekeeping is one thing, but I have seen many occasions when people will resort to blackmailing producers and directors into doing something for nothing on the basis that it will stand good in the future.²⁶

Despite his commitment to good working standards, his company has six full-time employees for six projects in pre-production, eight in advanced development, twelve in early development and thirty-seven at embryo stage. Such levels of self-exploitation are already in place among the producers and directors who hope to benefit from the changes: the consequences for the 'non-creative' technicians can only be drastic.

'Freelancing' has often benefited a small number of favoured employees while consigning most people to a situation of intermittent and marginal employment.²⁷ However, the existence of large and well-organised bodies of workers in the major TV companies means at least that those freelances who do find work are hired under union rates and conditions, and have at least a nominal chance of fair selection from the pool of unemployed. Without those stable bodies of workers the situation changes from freelancing to casualisation, in which the rates and conditions of employment, and the choice of employees, is at the whim of the employers.

The unions in general, and the ACTT in particular, could hardly be surprised by these developments. Not only have they come as the culmination of a long series of developments in the relationship between Government, employers and unions in TV itself, and in the context of a more general offensive on the part of the employing class and its political representatives on working class organisations, but the ACTT itself, at its General Council of March 9, 1986, authorised the hiring of an independent researcher to look at future problems facing the unions and to make recommendations as to how the policies and organisation of the union might be re-organised to meet them.

In the event, Reg Race, a former Labour MP, together with Claire Andrews, produced a report, *The Challenge Now*, in September 1986, which outlined in some detail the problems facing the ACTT. It detailed the introduction of direct broadcasting satellites (DBS) as having 'adverse effects on the employment structures and conditions of ACTT members'²⁸, cable as having a similar effect, and what it calls 'Lightweight Equipment' as meaning the need to revise agreements. In addition, the report calls attention to the fact that Government strategy towards the industry, and more broadly towards trade unionism, means that:

The question for ACTT to address now is whether the particular combination of economic, political and technological circumstances produces a new

²⁶ Quoted in E Freeman, 'How to Reach a Pitch', *Invision*, no 21, April, 1988, p 34.

²⁷ M Channan, 'Labour Power and Aesthetic Labour in Film and Television in Britain', *Media, Culture and Society*, vol 2, no 2, April, 1980, p 127.

²⁸ R Race and C Andrews, 'The Challenge Now: The Report of the ACTT Research Project', London, ACTT, pp 15-16.

²⁹ *ibid*, p 19.

³⁰ *ibid*, p 30.

³¹ D Housham, 'Shots from the Hip', *The Times*, July 15, 1987.

³² J Gapper, 'Film and Television Union Faces Rebellion', the *Financial Times*, April 18, 1988.

*situation in which the union needs to change its policies, procedures and organisation in order to survive and defend its members.*²⁹

In general terms, the report recognised the need to consider breaking with the union's own 'craft' tradition, not only in terms of merging with other unions (most notably BETA) and restructuring the internal life of the unions, but also in terms of a more positive approach to recruitment in new areas:

*No strategy has been evolved, or real resources deployed, to meet the serious challenge of the growth of new industries such as video duplication, facilities companies, cutting rooms, and production houses outside the purview of existing trade union agreements, recognition arrangements and rates of pay, and which provide a potential strike-breaking or trade union weakening facility to unscrupulous employers in the future.*³⁰

Certainly, then, at least an approximate picture of the future was available to the ACTT a year before Thatcher's speech.

At least some people in the ACTT recognised the problems but the evidence seems to be that turning the union round on such major items as these proved too slow a process and that current confrontation has found the union unprepared. ACTT General Secretary Alan Sapper met the suggestion that there might be the possibility of one of the TV companies following Rupert Murdoch's example of destroying union power in his UK newspaper empire by 'doing a Wapping' with the claim that: 'There would be a general strike in television. We'd ask the BBC's staff to support us. It would be open war.'³¹ There is no evidence that either the leadership or the membership of the ACTT was prepared for the scale and nature of the current conflict.

Indeed, even while embroiled in this struggle, there is evidence that the old craft mentality of the membership and the bureaucratic complacency of the leadership remains firmly entrenched in the ACTT. Thus the leadership organised very strongly for a merger with BETA in the run-up to the April 1988 Annual Conference and produced a 225 to 93 vote in favour of the plan to ballot for amalgamation. However, immediately after this result was announced union officer Peter Bould, Chairman of the ACTT's ITV division, was predicting that there would be a rebellion by his members against the merger.³² That has now developed. At the same conference, the union leadership argued for, and won, the strategy of trying to meet employers' threats by local negotiation rather than national resistance.

In the circumstances, both specific to the TV industry and more generally in the country, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the unions are likely to be defeated in the current round of disputes. Certainly, faced with a determined attempt to break the union, involving the sacking of the entire workforce of TV-AM, a tactic reminiscent of the Wapping dispute, the ACTT has proved unable to generalise the resistance of the local work-force and without such generalised resist-

ance the management will be able to pick off one group of workers after another.

We should, however, be clear that 'defeat' does not necessarily mean the destruction of one or more of the unions involved in organising the TV labour force. Apart from TV-AM, and the occasional threat by LWT to broadcast from Holland, none of the current round of negotiations involves derecognition of unions or the destruction of their organisation. The aim of the ITV management, and for that matter of the BBC, is to go into the next phase of competition with chastened and weakened unions representing a casualised, cheaper, more flexible work-force. Those conditions will be present even more acutely with the smaller companies since their managers are, if anything, under greater pressure.

There is a spectrum of responses to the above situation and its likely outcome, ranging from delight at the prospect of the ACTT getting its just deserts to a certain confusion as to the likely outcome. After all, TV technicians are not exactly nurses, with whom everyone, even impoverished academics, can feel sympathy. According to figures released by the employers themselves, the wage rates in 1986-87 were as follows:³³

Union	No of Employees	Average Pay £
Technicians (ACTT)	6340	23592
Studio Staffs (BETA)	3033	16807
Clerical (BETA)	2018	10582
Electricians (EETPU)	856	25775
Journalists (NUJ)	735	22228

Even allowing for possible employer-bias, three groups – technicians, electricians and journalists – earn wages significantly higher than the current national average. The other groups are probably relatively well-off, but they are hardly earning exceptional sums.

In the case of the technicians and the electricians at least, their high earnings, and their accompanying favourable staffing levels, were achieved largely by the strength of trade union organisation. There is an element of envy on the part of some people at the thought of others earning so much more money. And there is an answer to this attitude: if we were a bit better organised we too would be a bit better paid. Another quite common reason for hostility or indifference to the fate of the television unions lies in the belief that if they are broken and wages and conditions drastically worsened, other less fortunate groups will benefit. But the only people who will benefit from the more intense exploitation of the TV labour force are the shareholders of the TV companies. Not a single nurse will be better off if the ACTT is defeated. Consider the constant analogy with Wapping: there we saw the destruction of a number of unions, which had managed over the years to secure very high wage-rates for a portion of their members. They were replaced by a much smaller number of people earning much lower wages. Not one penny has found its way into the pockets of the low-paid, the unemployed or pensioners. The Murdoch empire, on the other hand,

³³ 15 regional franchise holding companies only cited in the *Financial Times*, April 11, 1988.

³⁴ J Petley, 'Independent Access', *Sight and Sound*, vol 56 no 4, Autumn, 1987, pp 244-248.

received a massive profit boost which it used to finance its expansion in Britain and elsewhere, and which materially assisted its attempts to muscle in to British broadcasting.

There is, however, a more substantial reason for welcoming the defeat of the unions and that is advanced by the school of thought which holds that the ACTT, and for that matter BETA, are complicit in the old oligarchic set-up and that their destruction is a necessary part of the introduction of market forces into TV. The weakening or ending of trade unionism and the wages and conditions that it has secured is both a necessary condition for, and one of the benefits of, the introduction of competition into a world of feather-bedding. The consequences of this will be peace, progress and general prosperity. This view is not only advanced by ideologues of capitalism, but even by some people whose reputations once lay on the left, for example some of the leading figures of the Independent Programme Producers Association (IPPA) and their '25% Campaign', who give the argument the little twist that it will also mean new, radical and genuinely independent voices winning a hearing.³⁴

The evidence is against such naive optimism. In the other 'leisure industries', particularly publishing, to cite the comparison made in the Government's 1986 report on financing the BBC, there has been a marked tendency towards the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of very large enterprises. The same future is in prospect for the TV industry: the majority of 'independents' who survive in the world of competition will be forced to expand very rapidly. As we have seen, the process of concentration is already under way in some areas of production, and the increased access to broadcasting, and its concomitant budgets, can only increase the speed of that process. Some of these medium-sized companies will be run by the likes of Maxwell or Branson, and perhaps some by independent producers like John Ellis or John Wyver, but, in order to survive, they all have to obey an identical economic logic. To win contracts for broadcast programmes they will have to compete on cost grounds with each other. That will mean they will be under continual pressure to keep costs down and to merge and amalgamate in order to reap economies of scale and defray the risks of each production against an extended portfolio. What is more, the independent production company that is anything other than a mere division of a large conglomerate will be in an even less independent position in relation to the broadcasting outlets than was the experienced producer in the old bureaucratic concerns. Even in the unfavourable climate of the 1970s, the BBC Drama Department run by Sean Sutton could boast a checklist of radical work to match anything the independents of Channel Four have produced. The work of Jim Allen and Trevor Griffiths, of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett, of Denis Potter and, for that matter, Alan Bleasdale and Philip Saville, was generated inside the monolith which was supposed to have prevented radical and innovative voices gaining a hearing. This was possible partly because the organisation was so large that it could afford to allow different, sometimes contentious,

productions to develop, discounting their economic and political costs against the daily output of normal and acceptable fare. The little company dependent on regular broadcasting commissions for its existence must please its potential paymasters each and every time.

The Channel Four model may have served as a laboratory for the production of TV programmes on reduced budgets, but it is no model for the future relationship between broadcasters and programme contractors. Innovative work has been possible because 'Channel Four was set up as a subsidised experiment whose ability to provide services aimed at niche markets was quite independent of market criteria. It had the obligation to experiment and provoke written into its aims and objectives in a way that no broadcasting organisation operating in a purely competitive market environment will. The broadcasters will determine the sort of markets they wish to reach and thus the sorts of programmes they wish to broadcast. They will contract to those firms who can deliver the best product, in their terms, at the cheapest rates. A large or medium-sized company with the resources to ride out a lean patch of broadcasting contracts, or with diversified activities to which it can turn as an alternative, might be in a position to negotiate more or less as an equal partner with the broadcasters. Any firm, and particularly any small firm, which does not have those resources will be obliged to go along with what the broadcasters want, or face bankruptcy. The effective subcontracting of TV production is a recipe for 'independent' companies which are completely dependent on the huge broadcasting companies that will have the capital to buy the franchises, lay the cable and launch the satellites.

The Government, certainly, is very pleased with the role of the independents in breaking the unions. They take up a chunk of their brief discussion of programme production in their recent White Paper to argue:

Traditionally, broadcasters in the UK have themselves made the television programmes they have not acquired from abroad. Channel Four broke this mould. The results have exceeded all expectations. Independent producers constitute an important source of originality and talents which must be exploited, and have brought new pressures for efficiency and flexibility in production procedures. . . . The Government has welcomed these developments, and the willingness of the BBC, IBA and ITV companies to embrace change. . . . the Government envisages that independent producers will continue to play a greater part in programme making in the UK.³⁵

The key words are obviously not the praise for 'originality and talent' but more familiar terms like 'exploit', 'efficiency' and 'flexibility'. So much regard does the Government have for these whizz-kids that it is not even going to insist that the post-1992 franchise holders maintain any in-house production capacity. Indeed, so far as the White Paper is concerned, there seems to be no provision for these franchise holders to maintain an in-state production base.

What is more, the record of the broadcasting unions in defence of

³⁵ Home Office
*Broadcasting in the
 '90s: Competition,
 Choice and Quality -
 The Government's
 Plans for Broadcasting
 Legislation*, HMSO,
 November, 1988,
 paras 10.2-10.4, p 41.

³⁶ Anon, 'Independent Television: The Price is Right', *op cit*, p 33.

³⁷ C Dunkley, 'Selling of Franchises Will Lower the Tone', the *Financial Times*, March 9, 1988.

broadcasters' freedom may not have been impressive in the past, but at least it existed. It was, after all, the unions that forced the BBC Governors to back down over *Real Lives*, the programme on Northern Ireland, and the ACTT has an excellent record of opposition to links with South Africa. In fact the existence of well-organised trade unions capable of resisting management censorship was one of the factors which permitted the limited flowering of critical voices discussed above. With the weakening of those unions the defence of the dissident voice will become much harder. In a broadcasting environment in which the unions are cowed the employers can tell anyone, 'new critical voice' or not, to shut up or get out.

The question of the future of broadcast trade unionism cannot be divorced from the more general issue of the future of broadcasting as a whole, since the unions are one of the most powerful forces in defence of the idea of public service broadcasting and the quality of programmes. The arguments which suggest that the shift to the new broadcasting framework will involve a fall in programme quality, and in particular a fall in the amount of original programming, are too familiar to need extensive rehearsal. *The Economist* recently remarked that 'costs are high for good reasons as well as bad . . . quality programmes can be expensive to make'³⁶. Christopher Dunkley was even more unequivocal: 'is there anybody . . . who believes for one moment that if [auctioning the franchises] were put into practice the result would be better programmes?'³⁷. The reason why the broadcasting unions are defenders of the quality of existing output ultimately has nothing to do with any altruistic motives they may possess, but because that defence is in the interests of the TV labour force in general and union members in particular. Any move to reduce the amount of original programming on British TV worsens the job opportunities of their members. Any attempt to revise the mix of programming towards simpler and cheaper formats means less interesting work involving a narrower range of skills for fewer of their members. Any reduction in the diversity of programming means redundancies. For all these reasons the broadcasting unions have no option but to defend the values of public service broadcasting.

One final argument advanced against the unions is that their insistence upon high wages and decent conditions are an obstacle to the export possibilities of British television programmes. The argument runs that British companies have a linguistic advantage in international competition in that they operate in the dominant international language and that, if wage costs can be forced down below international levels, there then exists a large pool of highly skilled labour to produce exportable programmes which could find a market even in the US. There are major flaws in this argument. It exhibits the classic British capitalist disease of not being able to see beyond next year's balance sheet. The pool of skilled labour did not come from nowhere: in the main it was trained by the BBC and honed its skills in the ITV companies. If those organisations are greatly weakened, as seems probable, and the training

and the range of skill-enhancement available is reduced, then some of that skilled labour will go elsewhere, some of it will retire, and the gaps will be made up with those who lack the essential skills. There is no sign of the state being prepared to invest in a training programme to compensate for such shortfalls and, as the pool dries up, so the advantage will disappear. -

Even in the short term there is no guarantee that this crude nationalist strategy will work. The costs of skilled labour may be driven down in Britain but it is unlikely that they will fall to the levels prevailing in Brazil or Mexico, both of which have large and extremely professional TV networks with a tradition of international operation. The linguistic advantage is illusory. There is no reason why the technical staff should speak English fluently, or at all, and as a matter of fact even the 'talent' could be dubbed. Even more tellingly, the reduction of wage costs in Britain will be used as a weapon to attack wages and conditions in other TV industries which are more obvious competitors, for example Australia and the US. The likely outcome of an international price war in TV production is a worsening of conditions for the whole of the work-force and a victory for those companies with the deepest pockets, who will also tend to be the largest. The idea of a 'national' solution in the epoch of international production and distribution is simply Utopian.

An analysis of the current offensive against the broadcasting unions shows that a number of popular beliefs are, in fact, misconceptions. The attack is not the direct result of the machinations of evil Tory politicians. While it has no doubt benefited from and been accelerated by the policies of the Government, there are powerful forces inside the industry itself whose interests lie in confronting the unions, particularly the ITV. Again contrary to popular belief, these forces do not consist wholly of evil multinational corporations, some of them even owned by foreigners. Certainly, there are multinational corporations who stand to benefit, but the local British ITV companies, local British advertisers and an assortment of indigenous entrepreneurs of various strengths and shades of opinion are all keen to profit from defeating the unions. Such defeat will not mean more or better programmes. Nor will it usher in a new era in which a flourishing culture of genuinely independent voices can grow. A defeat for the unions will put capital, and big capital at that, even more firmly in control of all aspects of British broadcasting and it will make the defence of any concept of public service that much more difficult. It will not result in a sharp growth of the industry but will destroy the very factors which have given it whatever status internationally it currently enjoys.

It follows that it is in the interest of those of us outside the direct conflicts to give what assistance we can to the unions. Even in a limited conflict like this the members of the ACTT and BETA, warts and all, are the force which represents the general interest of the whole of society other than a tiny group of proprietors. Unfortunately the current union organisations are too weak, too divided, too poorly led and too craftist in

their attitudes to win the immediate round of battles. They are likely to go into the new world of broadcasting with their organisations much weakened but basically intact, and in that they will mirror much of the rest of the British labour movement. They can, however, reverse the decline with the right policies. The first and most obvious step is a rapid and complete merger between the ACTT and BETA. The craft-based and sectional divisions which underpin these different organisations are relics of a past which is fast being obliterated by technical and political development and they must be buried with that past. A united union is the necessary condition for future resistance. Attempts to split off the ITU membership into a small rump union can only lead to further weakening of their potential bargaining power.

The next step is that the merged union needs to exert its maximum effort to organise the newer areas of production that have grown up in recent years. This will be a difficult and unfamiliar task. A relatively large number of small and medium-sized units is much harder to organise than a few very large employers, and the trend towards casualisation will make the task even more difficult. In order to succeed at all, the new union will need to demonstrate in practice the benefits of membership, and that will involve taking on and defeating one of the new companies it wishes to organise, an operation which makes rather different and more severe demands than those involved in a ritual confrontation with a large and comfortable employer highly dependent on union members. In particular, it requires a degree of generalisation, both within the industry and between the industry and the labour movement at large, and thus provides another reason for a decisive break from the sectionalism and craftism of the past.

Finally, the fact that the new media market is already genuinely international in scope means that purely national organisation, and purely nationalist policies are not enough. Even to fight the employers today, let alone to win, it is essential to see the workers in other national TV industries as allies rather than enemies. The response of the Dutch TV unions to LWT's plans to broadcast a strike-beating service from the Netherlands shows that this perspective is no more 'pie in the sky' than is a communication satellite.



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TECHNOLOGY AND GENDER

JANE ARTHURS ON WOMEN AND TELEVISION PRODUCTION

¹ See W Faulkener, and E Arnold, 'Smothered by Invention: the Masculinity of Technology', in W Faulkener and E Arnold (eds), *Smothered By Invention: Technology in Women's Lives*, London, Pluto, 1985 pp 18-51 for a fuller discussion of this definition of technology.

² See M McNeil (ed) *Gender and Expertise*, London Free Association Books, 1987 and W Faulkener and E Arnold (eds), *op cit.*

MOST PEOPLE THINK of technology as machinery, or hardware. If pressed, they might also include the techniques which are used to make or do something with these tools. This way of thinking leads easily to the assumption that the hardware and techniques associated with it are a given which then has effects on society, an assumption known as technological determinism. A simple example would be the film cameraman who told me: 'It's quite obvious that the reason why there have been so few women employed as camera operators in the past is that the cameras were just too big for them to carry. That's all there is to it. You're wasting your time with all these feminist theories which ignore this one basic fact.'

But technology is a cultural product and it is the network of social relations in which it is embedded which determine its design and use. Therefore, as well as taking technology to be the tools and techniques involved in making or doing something (in this case television programmes), I shall consider:

- (a) the division of labour in capitalist production processes, concentrating on gender divisions in particular
- (b) the knowledge that goes into creating tools and techniques and the social relations involved in creating, changing and sharing (or not sharing) that knowledge
- (c) the discourses which define our concept of technology and our relationship to it.¹

Before moving on to the television industry I want to outline a set of general points which have emerged from other analyses of gender and technology and relation to industrial production.² First, the fact that the capitalist system of industrial production is structured so that work processes are subdivided has produced a workforce that is similarly divided according to the specialist role played in relation to the process as a whole. These divisions operate along two axes, the horizontal divisions of designated skill demarcations and the vertical divisions, or hierarchies of power. These divisions have enabled jobs to be defined as suitable either for women or for men. Those that are allocated to men generally confer privilege in terms of pay, status and power.

While there is general agreement on these facts, there is less certainty about how these divisions relate to the technologies of production. There is one school of thought that considers male power in the work-

force to be directly related to male appropriation of the technological hardware. As owners and managers, men dominate because they own the equipment, make the decisions about how that equipment should be used and hire and fire the rest of the workforce, who are dependent on them because they control the means of production. Lower down the hierarchy, privileges are conferred on workers who are in possession of specialist knowledge and competence with technological hardware. Overwhelmingly it is men who do these jobs, and women are more likely to be found in jobs which are defined as non-technological.³

However, there have been challenges to this view which emphasise that it is not necessarily the nature of the work that defines a job in relation to gender. Changes in the organisation of production have been accompanied by substantial shifts in the gender definition of particular jobs. What hasn't changed is the belief that men and women should be doing different types of work, and that the work men do is more skilled.⁴

Recent research⁵ has focused discussion on the ideological dimensions of definitions of skill, which form the basis for both occupational classification and occupational ranking. There is a sense that the work women do must, of necessity, be thought of as unskilled, because it is done by women. If technology equals power for the person who owns, designs, makes or uses it, then one way of maintaining power relations between the sexes is to define jobs that women do as non-technological. Even in jobs where women use machinery and technical processes, the perception of the job as non-technological and semi or unskilled (and therefore low in status and pay) is remarkably common. Examples range from hairdressing, nursing and secretarial work to factory-based work such as clothing, manufacturing and printing. Thus a major problem in discussing women's relationship to the technologies of production is the difficulty of pinning down what is or is not a technological job. Therefore, feminist analyses should not assume that access to technological knowledge and skills will guarantee access to power and status for women who are currently disadvantaged by their ignorance of technological artefacts and techniques. It has been shown to be an illusory assumption in many instances; the persistence of gender inequality in the workplace despite reallocation of technical jobs to women has been well-documented.⁶

Although I am emphasising the importance of sexual divisions, the categories of race and class are also significant in this context. Access to power and status within the workplace will be differentially available to men and women. Men's relationship to technology is very much a matter of class; technician grades may be privileged as compared to many of the jobs that women do, but their own subordination within the overall hierarchy should not be forgotten. Similarly, some groups of women are more disadvantaged than others in the workforce. The single, white, middle-class career woman shares more of the opportunities of her male counterpart than do other less privileged women.

³ See, for example, C Cockburn *Machinery of Dominance, Women, Men and Technical Know-How*, London, Pluto, 1965.

⁴ A Game and R Pringle *Gender at Work*, London, Pluto, 1984.

⁵ See, for example, S Dex, 'The Sexual Division of Work', New York Harvester, 1985 pp 99-104; P Linn, 'Gender Stereotypes, Technology Stereotypes', in M McNeil (ed), *op cit*, pp 127-152; A Phillips and B Taylor, 'Sex and Skill', 1980, in *Waged Work, Feminist Review Reader*, London, Virago, 1986, pp 54-67.

⁶ See for example A Game and R Pringle, *op cit*.

⁷ M Gallagher, 'Participation of Women in the Mass Media Industries', *Unequal Opportunities: The Case of Women and the Media*, UNESCO, 1981, pp 79-105.

⁸ S Benton, *Patterns of Discrimination Against Women in the Film and Television Industries*, London, ACTT, 1975.

⁹ M Sims, *Women in BBC Management*, London, BBC, 1985.

¹⁰ L Buttmer, 'Training and Employment Of Women in Film, Video and Television in London', London Strategic Policy Unit, *Women in Focus, Part 1*, 1988; J Heylin, 'Female Technicians in London Television Employment', London Strategic Policy Unit, *Women in Focus, Part 2*, 1988.

¹¹ WFTVN, Channel Four Questionnaire, 1986 and E Phillips, *Women on the Map: Equal Opportunities in the Regional Audiovisual Industry, Women's Film and TV Network*, 1987 p 29.

However, for the purposes of this study, it is the sexual divisions upon which I shall concentrate.

In the light of these general points the next section on the television industry analyses the most recently available statistics in terms of the horizontal and vertical divisions of the workforce and how these relate to the technology of production. I shall then consider the extent to which power relations depend on men's dominance of the technological hardware and the means by which that dominance is maintained.

The Television Industry

The generalisations made above about occupational segregation and the sexual division of labour can be shown to apply to the television industry world-wide.⁷ The following analysis of the situation in Britain depends on the availability of statistics for the different sectors of the industry, and these provide a patchy overview. It is thirteen years since the Association of Cinematography and Television Technicians (ACTT) published a special report, *Patterns of Discrimination against Women in the Film and Television Industries*⁸, which is still the most wide-ranging analysis available. However, there have been a number of more recent specialised reports commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)⁹, the London Strategic Policy Unit Recreation and Arts Group (LPSU)¹⁰ and the Women's Film, Television and Video Network (WFTVN).¹¹ The regular statistical monitoring of the workforce by gender and ethnicity is now accepted practice in most of the large television companies, with the unions monitoring their own membership. Inevitably, less information is available on freelance workers and small independent companies than on full-time staff in the BBC and ITV companies.

Some idea of the proportion of women working in the industry can be gauged from union membership figures. Of an ACTT membership of around 26,000, approximately 23 per cent are women; of the Broadcasting and Entertainment Trades Alliance's (BETA) 37,000 members, approximately 40 per cent are women. The proportion of women in BETA reflects the higher proportion of administration and clerical grades in this union; the ACTT is primarily for production technicians with entry to the union tightly controlled (BETA also represents technical grades within the BBC).

These figures cover a wide range of jobs in the industry, and it is only when each grade is examined that the extent of the segregation between jobs for women and jobs for men becomes apparent. The 1987 breakdown of ACTT employment figures for the ITV companies shows that the jobs which are held almost exclusively by women in Schedule One are production assistant (100 per cent), booking assistant (100 per cent), schedules officer (88 per cent) and casting director (94 per cent), while other grades in which they form more than 50 per cent are vision mixer

(72 per cent) and programme researcher (53 per cent). The emphasis on administrative and clerical roles is apparent although vision mixing is an obvious exception, being a job which requires 'hands on' operation of high cost equipment directly involved in programme production, while the casting and research roles offer scope for a creative input to the finished product.

ACTT grades which are occupied exclusively by men in Schedule One in ITV companies are mechanical maintenance, stills photographer, scenic artist and sound supervisor. Those which have a very low proportion of women are engineer (1 per cent), television cameraman (3 per cent), sound technician (3 per cent) stills photographic technician (7 per cent), lighting (12 per cent), project engineer draughtsman (15 per cent), floor manager (16 per cent), graphics (22 per cent) and design (27 per cent). However, these figures obscure regional variations. ACTT figures show that companies operating outside the major conurbations have a more extreme sexual division of labour. For example, at Border Television, although women occupy 20 per cent of the First Schedule grades, production assistants, vision mixers and schedules officers make up 85 per cent of the jobs occupied by women and there are no men at all employed in these grades.

If we then compare the minimum annual salaries agreed for these First Schedule jobs it is apparent that the grades which are predominantly occupied by women have, in most cases, lower maximum salaries than those jobs which are predominantly done by men. For example, engineers, designers, lighting directors and graphic designers can all earn over 15,000 pounds at senior levels (at 1987 rates), and camera operators, sound technicians and scenic artists over 14,000 pounds. Of the jobs where women are well represented, casting directors and programme researchers do best at just over 12,000 pounds, while production assistants, vision mixers, schedules officers and booking assistants range from just under 12,000 pounds down to less than 8,000 pounds. These minimum rates do not include the potential earnings in overtime, nor do they indicate what rates are being paid in the freelance sector where individual negotiations often result in much higher wage levels. At any one time ITV companies may be employing around 10 per cent of their workforce as freelancers, particularly in the male-dominated areas of camera and sound. It is also the case that the sectors of the industry which pay the highest rates to freelancers, commercials and feature film production, are notoriously difficult for women to break into except in jobs specifically allocated to them in make-up and so on.

Conversely, the greatest opportunities for women over the last five years have been in the independent workshops and small independent companies producing programmes for Channel Four. Statistics for the latter are hard to come by as Channel Four does not monitor the employment policies of the companies it commissions. It did, however, help fund a survey by WFTVN in 1985 which shows that the channel

¹² L. Buttimer, *op cit*, p 8.

¹³ Figures prepared for an Equal Opportunities meeting held at the BBC on April 8, 1988.

¹⁴ J Heylin, *op cit*, p 38. All subsequent figures for BBC technicians derive from this source.

itself employs more women than men, though as usual the majority of these are concentrated in secretarial and clerical posts. It also attempted to establish how many of the programmes commissioned between 1984 and 1986 had a significant proportion of women involved in the production in technical and decision-making roles. There was considerable variation across different departments, with high rates being associated either with the presence of a woman as commissioning editor or the source of the programmes being the independent workshops. According to the LSPU survey in 1987 half the full-time workers in the workshops monitored were women.¹² However, production budgets in these sectors of the industry are of necessity kept as low as possible and wage rates are lower as a consequence. In the case of the ACTT franchised workshops all workers are paid the same minimum flat rate set by the ACTT (currently 11,170 pounds per annum), which, although avoiding differentials between male and female jobs, has the effect of depressing the potential earnings of everyone in the sector.

It is also difficult to provide detailed statistics for the BBC because figures are collated in relation to bands which include a variety of jobs at a given level within the organisation, thus providing more evidence of vertical than horizontal segregation. However, where separate figures are available they show that secretarial and clerical posts are occupied almost exclusively by women¹³, and that 69 per cent of vision mixers are women.¹⁴

Posts occupied exclusively by men in the film operations department are film cameraman, film grip, lighting electrician, film sound recordist, dubbing mixer, although a small proportion of women occupy assistant and holiday relief posts in these grades. Women fare slightly better in the television engineering and technical operations division where women represent 8 per cent of band one, 9 per cent of band 2 and 3 per cent of band three. However, the LSPU commissioned report reveals wide disparities within these figures between, for example, engineers at 1.5 per cent and floor managers at 42 per cent women. Why are women thought to be suitable for some production jobs and not for others? And why is the value placed on the skills required in terms of status, earnings and promotion opportunities lower for the jobs occupied by women?

The under-representation of women in the higher levels of the hierarchical pyramids which structure the mainstream television industry is another cause for concern. The ACTT figures show that only 17 per cent of programme directors are women. This is a job which demands a wide knowledge of the creative potential of the production technology and the personal confidence to exercise authority over the technical crew. The minimum agreed salary of 19,500 pounds is often exceeded as many directors work as freelancers. The other grade at this level is producer, 25 per cent of whom are women, a role which is equally powerful in terms of decision-making, but which demands administrative rather than technical skills.

The Sims Report¹⁵, which investigated the participation of women in BBC management in the mid 1980s, showed the extent to which women are confined to the lower bands of the hierarchy. In the two senior management bands women formed only 7 per cent of the total, and in band five, the next grade down, only 8 per cent. In contrast, band two was 53 per cent women, but it should be noted that this band includes the female ghettos of production assistant and researcher. Comparison with the most recent figures for April 1988 show a 3 to 4 per cent increase in the proportion of women in bands three to five, but no improvement at the very top. Nevertheless it is possible to take these figures as an indication that the Sims report has been a catalyst for change. Similarly, the publication of the 1975 ACTT report can be shown to have had an effect on the management structure of the union itself; seven out of seventeen ACTT managerial staff are now women, including an equality officer, whereas in 1975 all the ACTT full-time officers were men.

There is a frequently-expressed view that for equal opportunity policies to have any real effect they must have support at the highest levels. At the top of the pyramids are the controlling bodies, the IBA and the BBC Governors, and the top executive boards of each of the companies. Most of these bodies have one or two women out of a dozen or so places (the BBC Board of Management is an exception with currently no women at all). Though obviously an inadequate proportion, there is evidence that their presence can be influential. For example, it was Lady Plowden as chair of the IBA who in 1980 asked the ITV companies to supply her with a detailed breakdown of the women on their staff, information which they had not previously thought necessary to collate. However, the restricted opportunities for promotion experienced by women in the industry was fully analysed in the 1975 ACTT report, and it is remarkable how little has changed in the intervening years. 'The grades in which the majority of women work in ITV have no self-sufficient career structure. That is, they do not lead from the point of entry to the top in terms of money and authority, as do engineering, live sound and camera for instance . . . Those jobs which are seen as careers in themselves for women – production assistant and vision mixer are the most obvious examples – are not integrated into any career ladder. Therefore they do not attract men and because they do not attract men they are not integrated into any career ladder.'¹⁶

The Maintenance of Sexual Divisions in the Television Industry

The lack of change could be taken as evidence that that there is some intrinsic, biologically-based reason for the sexual division of labour in the television industry. However, a recently published women's guide to jobs in the industry¹⁷ points to the fact that there were many success-

¹⁵ M Sims, *op cit.*

¹⁶ S Benton, *op cit.*, p 29.

¹⁷ A Ross Muir, *A Woman's Guide to Jobs In Film and Television*, London, Pandora, 1987, pp 3-8.

¹⁸ S Liff, (1987) 'Gender Relations in the Construction of Jobs', in M McNeil (ed), op cit, p 182.

¹⁹ See for example: S Benton, op cit; A Coyle and J Skinner (eds), *Women and Work: Positive Action for Equal Opportunities*, London, Macmillan, 1988; M Sims, op cit.

ful female directors, writers and editors in the early film industry, before it was considered a glamorous job, who were then elbowed out of the way in the 1920s and 1930s. The Second World War provided another chance; many of the women who occupied senior posts in the BBC in the 1960s got their first opportunities at this time. There was also more scope on the technical side, with women getting jobs in a variety of grades which are extremely difficult for them to get into now. Once in, they were quickly promoted but, as in many industries, when the men returned after the war these opportunities closed down, so that between the 1950s and the 1970s the position of women in the industry actually deteriorated. There are clearly explanations other than biology for women's continuing exclusion from jobs which are defined as technically-skilled and therefore highly paid, and from those jobs which lead on to the managerial and decision-making roles at the top of the organisational hierarchy.

The persistence of occupational segregation, despite changes in the technologies of production and legislation to reduce sex discrimination, gives weight to the argument that the maintenance of a separation between men and women's work is more important than the particular form it takes. Thus occupancy of a job by men is likely to 'reinforce the perception of that job as requiring masculine characteristics and of masculinity involving the type of abilities needed to do that job.'¹⁸ The crucial component in that definition of masculinity is that men should do work which is seen as empowering.

The hegemonic ideologies of masculinity and femininity which underpin occupational segregation are based on an opposition whereby characteristics and abilities associated with one are not associated with the other. Management and employees collude to sustain the status quo because to challenge it is to challenge deeply personal feelings of what it means to be a man or a woman. Attempts to change gender relations must focus on the specific ways in which male power operates in the workplace. It is not something that can be analysed at a theoretical level alone. What follows, therefore, is an account of the ways in which women continue to be actively, if not consciously, excluded from the empowering jobs in the television industry.

One of the most significant deterrents to women seeking jobs in management and technical grades is the strongly and widely held belief that they do not have the necessary skills to be effective in those roles. However, the situation cannot be entirely resolved by women gaining the necessary skills in technology and leadership because, as many studies have shown¹⁹, the qualities valued in men are often not acceptable in women. They may be judged as unfeminine if they manifest the same skills, or be denied the same opportunities to use those skills, or have to prove themselves in ways that men in the same situation would not.

Women's reluctance to apply for jobs in the engineering and technical grades is not just because they may not have the necessary skills; it is

because of their sense of alienation from the social relations and discourses within which the technical processes are embedded. These are manifested in the patronising attitudes often perceived by women when working alongside men in their designated servicing roles, and in the more aggressively hostile and obstructive harassment many have experienced when they do cross the boundaries into predominantly male grades. Recent initiatives by Women Against Sexual Harassment²⁰ have revealed the extent of the problem within the television industry, a fact confirmed by equality officers in the main unions. Women are often prepared to complain in private of a range of unwelcome practices ranging from pornographic pictures on the walls, to unwanted touching and pressure to have sex, this last being a particular problem for women in subordinate roles or on temporary contracts where a refusal can jeopardise their careers. However, no one has yet taken up a case formally, despite the recent inclusion of sexual harassment clauses in union negotiated codes of practice, because of the fear of the consequences of going public.

The link between sexual identity and work identity has been used to justify women's exclusion from certain jobs in the industry, for fear that it would disrupt working relations, which in many situations are based on a male camaraderie that cannot accommodate the presence of women except as objects of sexual attention. This is particularly true in the engineering grades, as indicated by Lynne Collis, a transmission engineer at Tyne Tees Television: 'I am viewed as unfeminine, but I think that is as much because I do not defer to men in a traditionally feminine way, as because I'm doing something that's not considered a woman's job. I've had a supervisor sitting next to me at the tea table saying that he really dislikes women who try to be men and he obviously means me . . . Now they've taken to putting headlines from newspapers on the walls. One says, "Men must be dominant"; another says, "Women should obey their husbands in everything"; and a third says, "Women are the weaker sex"'.²¹ They are explicitly fighting back against a woman who has claimed a power to which she is not, in their view, entitled.

The sense of being isolated and a usurper in an alien male culture was also experienced by Zoe Hardy, a former camera operator at London Weekend Television: 'If there had been another woman there, it would have made all the difference . . . It's so difficult to deal with on your own. The men used to make comments about my clothes. Every single day there would be some joke about my appearance . . . You're expected to idolise the older cameramen and one day, if you look right and they've played jokes on you and you've laughed, then they'll give you a camera to try. With me, no matter how much I tried, I could never fit into that sort of hierarchy so it took them much longer before they trusted me. Even when my training finished, I never got the sort of breaks to operate a camera as the others did.'²² The experience persuaded her to give up and move into other areas of production.

²⁰ Reported by Melissa Benn in *The Guardian* May 10, 1988, p 16.

²¹ A Ross Muir, op cit, p 133.

²² *ibid*, pp 51-52.

²³ *ibid* pp 83-85.

²⁴ M Sims, *op cit*.

²⁵ H Baehr and A Spindler-Brown, 'Firing a Broadside: on Feminist Intervention into Mainstream TV' in H Baehr and G Dyer (eds), *Boxed in: Women and Television*, London, Pandora, 1987, pp 117-131.

²⁶ All quotations from Anne Hunter are taken from an interview with the author on April 12, 1987.

²⁷ A Ross Muir, *op cit*, p 302.

Zelda Baron describes the odds against her succeeding as a director after years of working in continuity: 'There were three things against it happening to me. I'm a woman, I'm getting on a bit and I'm a technician . . . They'd rather risk a huge budget on a young chap who's done one pet food commercial . . . I feel that producers I have worked with as a continuity girl find something rather unpleasant about someone stepping out of their "box", especially women . . . We women are loved dearly in the film business as long as we are doing our womanly job, in addition, of course, to making the coffee, handing out aspirins and pats on the head.'²³ So she is now working as a director in the United States, where her success with her first film has led to other offers – in Britain it has not.

A disincentive, identified by the Sims report²⁴, to women taking up managerial and supervisory roles in the BBC, was the perception of managerial styles as 'macho'. Women complained that the approach relied on generating an atmosphere of fear through techniques of bullying and coercion. Not surprisingly many women felt unwilling and unable to take on this role and so decided against applying for promotion. One important characteristic of many all-women production groups in the independent workshop sector has been the principle of non-hierarchical structures and co-operative methods of working. These generate their own set of problems; accounts of attempts to stay within these ideals while producing programmes for Channel Four highlight the pressures which militate against these methods of working within the commercial industry²⁵. But to many women the chance to work in this way is one of the main reasons for developing alternative institutions outside the mainstream industry. Some women working in the mainstream, however, would be satisfied by minor changes in managerial style which take into account some of the less abrasive methods of motivating a workforce.

Examples of how discrimination operates in practice inevitably draw on individual experience, and not all women experience these forms of exclusion or interpret them as discrimination. Some, like Anne Hunter, a management trainer at the BBC, who have succeeded within the existing system and culture, are convinced that they are working within a meritocracy that rewards talent irrespective of sex; in order for more women to make it into male-dominated areas it is only necessary to give women the skills, motivation and confidence to want to do it.²⁶ Many women who have been stuck in female ghetto grades blame their own lack of ambition for their lack of career progress: 'I can't honestly say I've been discriminated against. It's my own fault if I've not pushed forward' says Kathleen Ward, a fifty-year-old vision mixer at Granada.²⁷ She describes the considerable skill and responsibility of her job, commenting 'a good vision mixer can get people out of trouble and you can carry directors', without any sense of resentment at the relatively low pay and status of her grade. This is partly a result of low expectations: in comparison to many women's jobs outside the industry she

is comparatively well off. Also, many women can see the pressures on those few women who do move into male-dominated grades and choose to stay in a 'happy rut' instead. But, above all, the distinguishing feature of these women is that they interpret their position in the industry in individualistic terms, failing to take into account the evidence for systematic discrimination against women as a social group. Those women who fit into the existing system are accused by Susan George of WFTVN of ignoring the needs of women who can't or won't adapt to male-oriented working conditions and occupational culture, an adaptation which requires the acceptance of masculine values and priorities²⁸.

Television shares with computing a use of terminology which is off-putting to many women. As Lloyd and Newell point out²⁹, the use of the term 'hardware' to describe the equipment has positive connotations that link masculinity with the skill to use it. The use of numbers to refer to pieces of equipment may seem neutral enough but it is a practice with which many women feel less comfortable than if words were used. The trade and hobby magazines, with their emphasis on the 'gee-whizzery' of the equipment, the BBC job adverts and training publicity that still insist on referring to 'cameraman', all contribute to a mode of address that is implicitly masculine.

There is also an attitude towards the sharing of technical knowledge and skills that is based on the premise that to have that knowledge is to be powerful. This has two consequences. One is that to be unsure or ignorant is a sign of weakness and therefore to be ridiculed in others and never admitted in oneself; the other is that those who have the knowledge are secretive about it and will only share it with a few 'chosen people'. This generates an atmosphere in which technical knowledge is a counter in a game of power relations rather than something willingly exchanged in an atmosphere of trust and co-operation³⁰.

The symbolic meaning of the technology is that it gives power to those who use it, even though that power may be less fully realised than is promised in the discourses through which the equipment is represented. M McNeil makes this distinction, arguing that men's romance with technology ensnares them into new forms of exploitation by working long, irregular hours in contexts where they have little control over the goals and purposes to which their labour is directed.³¹ This detachment from the overall context is doubly difficult for women because it is more likely that the programme on which they are working will either fail to represent women's interests or actively contribute to the perpetuation of demeaning stereotypes that serve to reinforce their own powerlessness. This emphasis on the power of the technology leads to definitions of professionalism and excellence in terms of technical perfection and a drive to upgrade the equipment, thus contributing to escalating costs in the industry and reinforcing the gap between highly capitalised international media corporations which can compete at this level and more socially-conscious, but less technically-proficient workshop groups within which non-hierarchical and non-discriminatory practices are practiced.

²⁸ All quotations from Susan George are taken from an interview with the author on April 12, 1987.

²⁹ A Lloyd and L Newell, 'Women and Computers', in W Faulkner and E Arnold (eds), *op cit*, pp 238-252.

³⁰ This is based on my own observations and experience.

³¹ M McNeil, 'It's a Man's World', in M McNeil (ed), *op cit*, pp 187-198.

It could be argued that the only way that the masculine culture can be made more hospitable to women is by the implementation of codes of practice which ensure that more women are recruited and promoted into grades where they are in a minority. Just a few female colleagues, or women as role models, would provide the support and encouragement for other women to feel comfortable about applying so that the extremes of behaviour encouraged by a single-sex environment would be eradicated. To be effective this would need to be accompanied by a parallel influx of men into female ghettos; this would require a re-evaluation of the pay and status accorded to these grades in order to make them attractive to men.

However, some women argue that this is a waste of time. Patriarchal values are so inextricably linked with capitalist systems of production that it is inevitable that women who succeed in these environments have to do so on masculine terms. Feminists should rather concentrate their energies on developing alternative institutions within which radical new forms of audio-visual expression can be developed. The problem with this separatist strategy is that without the access to capital and distribution outlets, these groups are destined to stay on the margins with little opportunity to influence the majority. While supporting the work of these groups, I should want to argue for the importance of also finding ways for feminist women to gain a greater influence in the mainstream television industry, despite the attendant difficulties. Initiatives to achieve these goals are already being taken by some of the television companies, unions and media education and training institutions, but although there is greater acceptance of the need for equal opportunity policies there are still enormous obstacles to be overcome before the policies can become effective.

The range for changes recommended and, in some cases, implemented through the various Equal Opportunity (EO) policy initiatives now taking place include:

- (a) institutional structures such as the appointment of equality officers, and the formation of committees of equality
- (b) monitoring the composition of the workforce by gender, ethnic origin, disability, occupation and grade
- (c) scrutiny of recruitment and promotion procedures to identify and remove the barriers which either discourage applications from, or the appointment of, a representative proportion of women and other minority groups
- (d) training opportunities both to provide women with the skills and knowledge they need for technical and management jobs and to increase levels of awareness on EO in existing managers
- (e) improvement in arrangements for maternity leave, child care, flexible hours and job sharing
- (f) disciplinary procedures for sexual and racial harassment.

However, even where these are agreed as policy objectives, there are reasons why they may not be effective in reducing inequality in practice. This can be most easily illustrated by the case of the BBC, who were the first in the field with a written statement on equal opportunities in 1975. Although this did result in all jobs apart from transmission engineer being opened to both sexes, it is apparent from the statistics outlined above that there has been little real progress. Since then, the ITV companies have taken the lead with Thames Television formulating a positive action policy in 1981; LWT and Central Television followed suit and the BBC renewed its commitment following the recommendations outlined in the Sims Report (1985). Both the ACTT and BETA have had officers with a responsibility for equality issues since the early 1980s. In fact, in ACTT equality officer Sady Robarts' view, the impetus for EO has until recently come almost entirely from the unions, which has enabled management to dismiss it as just another union demand.³²

In the large companies the inertia produced by policies of internal appointments and reductions in staffing tends to reproduce the status quo. The Sims report identified lack of available posts as a problem for women seeking promotion in the BBC owing to a glut of middle-aged men who came into the industry in the 1960s. Thames TV's Technical Training Scheme, a positive action initiative, ceased to run between 1985 and 1987 because of the non-availability of permanent jobs in the relevant grades. As Christina Driver, BETA national officer, pointed out, at the present rate of increase in the proportion of women it will be thirty years before the policies will have had any significant effect.³³ Sady Robarts is also aware of the long time-scales involved and the need to be satisfied with small steps in the right direction because achieving even those requires an enormous struggle which can only succeed where management is reasonably sympathetic.

These time-scales are exacerbated by the often powerless and isolated position that EO officers occupy in the large companies, and the purely consultative role of EO committees. Any change in industrial organisations is often perceived as a threat and without the strong support of a high-ranking executive and middle ranking line managers, personnel managers or junior EO officers have little chance of success.³⁴ It has been suggested that the recent upsurge in EO activity at the BBC owed more to the sympathetic support of Michael Grade as Controller of BBC 1 than to ten years of campaigning by more junior women employees.³⁵ Another step forward has been the formation of a joint Independent Television Companies Association (ITVA) and union committee to review the implementation of the stated agreement on EO in the union 'white book', which forms the basis for ACTT working conditions. As with many EO committees, some of the management representatives were keen to stop anything concrete emerging from the discussions, regarding the exercise as a way of containing the pressure for action. However, the experience gained by Sady Robarts in negotiating with

³² All quotations from Sady Robarts are taken from an interview with the author on April 11, 1988.

³³ All quotations from Christina Driver are taken from an interview with the author on May 5, 1988.

³⁴ L. Paddison, 'Key Points for Personnel Professionals', *Personnel Management*, April 1988, p 55.

³⁵ L. Loach, 'Campaigning for Change', in H. Baehr and G. Dyer, (eds), *op cit*, p 60.

³⁶ R Race and C Andrews, *The Challenge Now* ACTT report, 1986.

reluctant management has enabled her to push for and achieve an agreed, detailed code of practice on EO implementation for ITV as a whole. This will have the weight of management as well as union agreement behind it which will make it harder for individual companies to ignore. At least it would have done if the ITVA was not about to fall apart in the present upheaval over restrictive practices and wage levels which has led to Tyne Tees Television withdrawing from the ITVA.

The planned increases in the proportion of programming supplied to both the BBC and ITV by independent producers and the consequent increases in the freelance production sector are also seen as threats to any progress for equal opportunities. First because it is the casualised labour force that is the most difficult to monitor or influence; contracts of employment are measured in days and weeks rather than years, the importance of 'contacts' outweighs any formal appointment procedure and the uncertainty of employment makes protection of existing workers a high union priority. Working conditions as a freelance, with long hours, short notice and the need to spend nights away from home, are often difficult to combine with domestic commitments. Similarly, the threat of redundancy for employees in the large companies as a consequence of the current moves to make ITV more competitive in the satellite age, makes demands for flexible hours or crèche facilities a low priority, particularly for the male majority. The only positive result of this for women may be the protective measures taken by the ACTT to survive as a powerful force in television. Faced with the employment of non-union labour at TV-AM and the ambitions of the EETPU to become the dominant union in the industry, ACTT closed shop policies, which have in the past acted as a barrier for women wanting to work as technicians in broadcasting, show signs of crumbling. Expansion of membership is now under discussion following recommendations in a recently commissioned report.³⁶

The three most effective ways of reducing inequality in the industry have not yet been taken up. These are quotas, contract compliance and equal pay for work of equal value. Although some companies now monitor the number of women appointed and in post, there is no obligation to do anything with that information and plenty of excuses can be found for sustaining the status quo, the most powerful of which is that women can't be appointed if they don't apply in sufficient numbers. In fact BBC figures show that in most cases the number of men and women appointed are in proportion to the number of applicants. If, however, there was a commitment to achieving a quota much more effort and ingenuity could be devoted to making sure that more women applied.

Contract compliance, a strategy used successfully by the GLC and extensively in the US, would be of particular significance for the growing independent production sector. In the case of the TV industry it would mean that all the companies commissioned by Channel Four, and increasingly the BBC and ITV as well, would have to show a

commitment to EO before a contract would be awarded. Channel Four's current attitude to this procedure is that it is unrealistic as they have neither the resources to monitor the companies nor the desire to constrain their ability to make decisions on commercial grounds, but it is difficult to envisage how else EO can be achieved in the fragmented freelance sector.

Equal pay for work of equal value has begun to be fought for in other industries as a result of recent amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act (1984), but has yet to be given union priority in the TV industry. It is this that would do more than anything else to break down the sexual division of labour on which discrimination against women relies. If the skills that women contribute to the production process were recognised as of equal worth of those of men it would bring their jobs into the mainstream of the career ladder, and allow women to move up the hierarchy. It would also encourage men to move into these jobs and decrease the incentive to define certain skills as intrinsically masculine or feminine because the structures would not encourage the maintenance of privilege on the basis of gender identity. That this strategy is potentially effective is indicated by the backlash from the Confederation of British Industry, which is currently campaigning against the legislation on the grounds that it would be too costly. This opposition and the complexity of the legislation itself create formidable obstacles to union progress in this area.

Career development has been identified as of crucial importance for women because there is such disparity between the proportion at the bottom and at the top of the hierarchy. Concern over this situation at the BBC led to the commissioning of the Sims report³⁷, one of the recommendations of which was for women-only management training, as well as for an increase in women's participation in mixed courses.

Comparison of the figures shows that there has been a significant increase in women attending the mixed courses, from 27 per cent of the total in 1984 to 37 per cent in 1987. This includes an increase in women attending middle and senior management courses, although they still form only 20 per cent of those attending the most senior courses. There are now six women-only courses per year, taking eighteen women each time and there remains a backlog of demand. Robert McLeash, Head of Management Training, looks forward to a time when single-sex courses will not be thought necessary, but while there is a demand from women they will continue to run.³⁸

The advantage with mixed courses, in McLeash's view, is that they reproduce the working environment more closely and are, therefore, a better forum for the challenging of existing attitudes and the development of different modes of behaviour, particularly from men. It enables mixed teams to be set up in which the value of difference between group members can be demonstrated and which allow more co-operative, less aggressive and 'macho' style of management to be explored. However, the advantage of women-only courses is that they provide a chance for

³⁷ M Sims, *op cit.*

³⁸ All quotations from Robert McLeash are taken from an interview with the author on April 12, 1988.

women to share the common problems that they face in a male-dominated working environment, where they often feel isolated, and to develop strategies to overcome the disadvantages that they experience because of their sex. Whereas the mixed courses are concerned with the rules and procedures of the BBC and the general development of interpersonal skills, the women's courses concentrate on career planning, assertiveness and the provision of role models in the form of talks from women who have succeeded in the BBC.

This sort of training for women, however welcome, does tend to reinforce the idea that it is women who are the problem and if they could only be encouraged to be more ambitious and confident the present inequalities would be overcome. Yet considerable barriers still remain, such as the rigid attitudes toward career breaks. McLeash described the tendency for professional women to drop out between the ages of thirty-two and thirty-seven to have children as 'an insuperable difficulty' because these years have been identified as the most crucial and decisive in terms of career progression. His suggestion to alleviate this problem is for women to have their children in their early twenties instead, but a more practical solution would surely be for the institution to develop less 'ageist' criteria for the development of management potential. There is also a need to break down the 'workaholic' syndrome which demands that an employee must devote his or her life to the organisation in order to be taken seriously, an attitude that Anne Hunter, a management trainer, believes is diminishing now that there is greater recognition of the detrimental effects of stress on managerial performance.

A recent Sex Discrimination case, *Glass versus the BBC*, also reinforces the view, expressed by WFTVN worker Susan George, that the BBC does not lack assertive and ambitious women; rather it fails to promote them because male managers discriminate against them. Despite Anne Hunter's claim that the BBC is a meritocracy and that the board system is objective and fair, Christina Driver of BETA criticises the present promotion system, which the *Glass* case highlighted. Four well-qualified women and one less-qualified man were competing for promotion to a Senior Researcher grade. To everyone's surprise, including the male candidate, the job went to the man. The head of department, who pushed through this decision, has in the course of the last two years been converting all the senior jobs in his department to male jobs although they had been 50 per cent female. According to Christina Driver, there is no guarantee against this sort of unconscious and unrecognised discrimination until an efficient way of measuring merit has been instituted. At present the board is not required to draw up a person specification, nor a full job description and there is no agreed way to evaluate each candidate. She describes it as 'a mish-mash of untrained people coming together' who appoint on the basis of the candidate's performance at the board and on an assessment of potential, which is highly subjective and prone to influence by unconscious prejudices. Despite the BBC's declared commitment to equal oppor-

tunities, Rosemary Glass has experienced nothing but obstacles from personnel and management in her efforts to bring this case forward for reassessment.

The role of special training for women as a catalyst for their career development must, therefore, be seen in the wider context of promotion criteria and systems which determine whose talents get recognition and the chance of development. At the BBC this involves the monitoring of the workings of the appraisal and attachment systems as well as the appointment boards, initiatives which require commitment and equal opportunities training for management as a whole.

Routes into the industry have been dominated by acceptance on to a BBC training course and the gaining of ACTT membership, both of which have required a mixture of persistence, the right background, luck, nepotism, patronage and an absolute conviction of the wish to work in television. The situation is changing, with initiatives already under way to open up the industry to those social groups which have been under-represented through the previous system, particularly in technical grades.³⁹ These include liaison with a wider social mix of schools and re-vamped recruitment literature from the BBC, while the ACTT has appointed a female training officer who is closely involved in equal opportunity training initiatives such as JOBFIT, the North East Media Development Council (NEMDC) and the Independent Media Training Trust (IMTT), all of which offer union accreditation.

An important component in improving access to training for women is to deal with the problem as expressed by some recruiters that girls don't do the right subjects at school to be considered for technical training. This usually means physics, maths or technology qualifications. The difficulties of persuading girls to continue with these 'masculine' subjects beyond puberty at a time when the desire to achieve a socially-acceptable femininity is at its strongest are well known. Finding solutions is more problematic but single-sex classes, more contextualising of abstract knowledge, the validation of students' existing knowledge and more interactive teaching methods have been thought necessary. Changing girls' attitudes to science and technology will only be accomplished by transforming the nature of the subjects and the social relations of the classroom.⁴⁰

But further action is needed, such as the breaking down of barriers that have more to do with restricting entry than with ability to do the job. There is considerable resistance from male technicians with traditional technical qualifications (or no formal educational qualifications at all) to new entrants with different sorts of backgrounds. Felicity Oppé, at the NEMDC, emphasises the danger of confusing necessary abilities for the job with the abilities traditionally possessed by those already in that field of work.⁴¹ The NEMDC, for example, draws a distinction between engineering skills and those required by technicians. It is only the former who require proficiency in electronics, while the manipulation of camera, sound and editing equipment can be

³⁹ See L. Buttimer, *op cit*, for further details.

⁴⁰ G. Baran, 'Teaching Girls Science', in M. McNeil, (ed) *op cit*, pp 87-103.

⁴¹ E. Phillips, *op cit*, pp 20-22.

achieved without the same detailed understanding of the way the equipment works. Technicians require the ability to anticipate how certain meanings and aesthetic forms can be achieved by using the equipment to create desired effects. An arts-based education is more likely to be a fruitful background for these activities, when access to and familiarity with the equipment have been achieved.

The provision of opportunities for women and ethnic minorities is one of the major aims of JOBFIT. Unlike the NEMDC this is a national training scheme originated by the Greater London Council (GLC) and now sponsored by the ACTT, BFTPA, IPPA and latterly the IFVPA and Channel Four, and funded by an industry-wide levy. Rather than running the scheme from a production centre set up for that purpose, it provides on-the-job training in the form of attachments to film production companies plus twelve weeks per year at college (presently the Polytechnic of Central London, the London College of Printing and the National Film School Short Course Unit). Twelve trainees have finished the two-year scheme, thirty-nine are currently in the pipeline. Of these, 50 per cent are women and 33 per cent from ethnic minorities. Channel Four also fund a separate scheme for five ethnic minority trainees, two men and three women. No formal education qualifications are required by JOBFIT (though 50 per cent of the current intake have completed a further or higher education course), nor are there any upper age limits. However, evidence of appropriate abilities, personal resilience, a willingness to work long hours and spend periods away from home are necessary.

This scheme highlights a fundamental dilemma for those interested in fostering equal opportunities for women in the industry. Should efforts be made to gain access for women, whereby they must do all they can to fit into the industry as it exists, or should demands be made on the industry to adapt itself to meet women's needs and aspirations? JOBFIT is very firmly on the side of the former strategy: 'It's more important to get people trained and working than jeopardise it by a complaining attitude', is the response that JOBFIT administrator, Maggie Samson, made to criticisms that the scheme expects the trainees to fit into an industry whose working practices exclude mothers because of the long hours and where they are warned to expect sexual and racial harassment.⁴² The scheme relies on the goodwill of the industry to provide attachments and to contribute to the levy, and its success will be measured by the extent to which the trainees are accepted and subsequently given jobs in the industry. It is, therefore, almost inevitable that trainees have to accept that they will in some cases be used as cheap, unskilled labour on attachments with little chance to learn the technical skills to which they aspire. In order to compensate, the college courses concentrate on 'hands-on' production training with no priority given to critical analysis of the industry either in terms of its organisational or representational practices. In Maggie Samson's view, the latter would be inappropriate to a vocational training course which she

⁴² All quotations from Maggie Samson are taken from an interview with the author on April 13, 1988.

sees as having quite different goals from the broader concerns of media education. However, the industry itself is changing and this will necessitate a different approach to training. At a recent conference of broadcasters and media educationalists⁴³, there was widespread agreement that the trend towards casualisation and the retrenchment of the large companies will reduce their willingness to put money into training; nor will they be providing jobs for life. Already attacks on traditional job demarcation have begun (at TV-AM for example) and, although fiercely resisted by the ACTT as an attempt at de-skilling, the increasingly easy-to-use production technology makes this trend seem unstoppable. These changes will increase the need for pre-entry training in a wider set of skills, to enable people to be flexible across different specialisms and to survive in an environment where business acumen and an entrepreneurial approach will be as important as a craft skill.

Whether these changes will benefit women is difficult to predict. Certainly the new courses being set up in higher education which combine business, information technology and media studies are proving attractive to female applicants; for example, 80 per cent of the first two years of the Communication and Information Studies degree course at Brunel University are women. Similarly, the HND in Business and Finance (Media, Design and Communication) at Ealing College of Higher Education has in the past three years attracted around twice as many female as male applicants, a proportion which is reflected in the numbers accepted on to the course, and a new joint honours degree in Business Information Technology and Media Studies at North Cheshire College has so far received more applications from women. These gender profiles are very different from those found on the well-established, ACTT-accredited college courses which have, until some recent initiatives at the London College of Printing and the National Film School, had very small numbers of female students.⁴⁴

These new courses, like the independent training offered by the NEMDC and IMTT in particular, combine theoretical and practical courses in the use of media technologies (including the increasingly-important use of computer systems) within an industrial and business context, with critical analysis drawn from the academic traditions of media and cultural studies. In the past media studies graduates have been viewed with some hostility by the media industries, because of their critical awareness, but also because of their largely theoretical and academic approach to the media. However, these combined courses offer the sort of skills needed for survival in a very different industrial environment, and are more likely to challenge sexist and racist practices in the industry. While training on the job remains the main access to employment, the status quo will continue. When the value of a broad-based pre-entry training comes to be more generally accepted the era of the 'critically aware practitioner' should provide a more congenial environment for women in television production. At present it is only the underfunded, low-paid and in most cases non-unionised indepen-

⁴³ Conference organised by the Council for National Academic Awards at Regents Park College on May 10, 1987 on 'Media Education and the Broadcasting Industry'.

⁴⁴ See L. Buttimer, *op cit*, for more details.

⁴⁵ Reported by Roger Siverstone, a course leader, at a seminar organised by the Society for Education in Film and Television, at the Polytechnic of Central London, December 5, 1987.

dent workshops and a few small progressive companies making programmes for Channel Four that provide such opportunities for women.

The problem with the new courses is that they tend to be trapped by the histories of their constituent subjects. The struggle towards inter-disciplinarity is hindered by the different discourses through which the subjects are represented and by the limitations of the teachers, who in many cases exemplify the legacy of a deeply divided industrial and education system. Thus the 'masculine' subjects of technology, business and production techniques will be taught almost entirely by men. There is a danger that, without a concerted effort to 'train the trainers' and to get more women into the teaching of these areas, the assumptions about women's role in relationship to technology will be reproduced. Students on the Brunel course are significantly less enthusiastic about the computing side of the course and say that they feel like a bunch of critically-trained social scientists being inserted into a male engineering culture.⁴⁵

My own experiences of teaching television production at two different institutions has provided many examples of female students finding communication with male technicians and lecturers difficult, often because they find them more concerned with the accumulation and possession of the hardware than with enabling students to learn how to use it.

Another danger, is that, in an era of de-skilling and redundancies, male power bases within the workforce will be mobilised to protect existing structures of privilege. It is possible that production jobs, whether technical or not, will become defined as less skilled and lower in status than at present, so that the point at which women are allowed into these jobs in substantial numbers will be the point at which they become low paid, insecure and dead end. The men will hang on to the plum jobs which will involve the design, manufacture and maintenance of the equipment, the ownership and management of production companies and the setting up of business deals, all of which depend on the accumulation of capital, contacts and expertise built up over the period of their existing dominance in the industry. Women will need engineering and business expertise to avoid being at the bottom of the heap, and the ability to make programmes will be undervalued and no longer protected by a powerful union pre-entry closed shop or large, élitist organisations such as the BBC.

Uncertainty about how the industry is going to emerge from this period of radical change makes predicting effective strategies for education and training very difficult. This is one reason why we need to produce flexible and broadly-educated entrants, who can adapt to changing circumstances. However, that does not mean that they should merely adapt themselves to conditions over which they have no control. For women to achieve equal participation they need to have clear goals, based on an understanding of existing reasons for their exclusion and subordination. These goals should not be formulated on the basis of

'deficit' models of women's skills and aptitudes. It is not simply a question of women needing to develop skills which they currently lack, such as technical expertise with production equipment or assertiveness and willingness to exercise authority. Rather we need to pursue strategies to change the institutions within which television is produced. Those changes are not guaranteed by more women entering the industry, although that makes them more likely. It requires political and industrial activity to fight and negotiate to provide a working environment which takes account of women's needs and rights; equality officers can't do the job on their own.

The reproduction of an exclusive masculine culture, a major barrier to women's participation in the industry across the range of available jobs, can only be broken down by a change in the ideological definitions of gender identity. While accepting that this requires changes in society generally, the role of working relations in the construction of masculinity and femininity needs to be more widely understood. The linking of technology with power and with masculinity is one way in which hierarchies of gender are maintained. A new generation of media practitioners who have been encouraged to think critically about the context and purposes of the technology they use and who have the ability to envisage new purposes and new ways of working may go some way toward breaking down the existing divisions of sex and gender.

A version of this article was given as a paper at the International Television Studies Conference in London in 1988.

DEREGULATION, INNOVATION AND CHANNEL FOUR

BY SYLVIA HARVEY

Having been denied access to radio and television, we have had to write our most persuasive essays with the blunt pen of marching ranks.¹

Martin Luther King

¹ Quoted in Nicholas Johnson, 'Regulation American Style', *Inter Media*, July September 1987, Vol 15, No 4/5, p32.

WHAT SYSTEMS OF COMMUNICATION are appropriate for free and democratic societies? In the now complex debates concerning free markets, consumer sovereignty, choice, diversity, quality, innovation and regulation, this fundamental question is sometimes forgotten. In looking at a particular example of broadcasting practice, and in exploring the policy debates that brought it into being and are now likely to change it, this article attempts a contribution to the answering of that question.

As one of the key institutions of social life in Britain, television is still relatively young, popular and controversial. If we date its birth as a mass medium to around 1956, to the age of 'affluence' and 'you've never had it so good', while its grandparent may be Lord Reith, its peers are the punk generation. Older people grew up without it, middle-aged people worry about it, younger people with an easy sophistication of reading and response take it for granted. Emerging as a popular form in the 1950s, it carries with it still the aura of a period of cross-party consensus concerning the compatibility of a vigorously-flourishing capitalism and the creation of a welfare state. It must now chart the rapids of a departure from that consensus. For the post-war consensus principle of universal social provision of the basic necessities of life (which has effectively also included in Britain, until now, the provision of information and entertainment through television) has now been challenged; its short and comfortable tenure in the body politic is now under notice of radical change and possible eviction.

As an institution television now faces the biggest changes in its short

history; as a mere four-channel system in Britain it confronts the realities of rapidly changing and proliferating technologies of distribution (cable and satellite), and a public policy environment committed to the principles of a free market, and therefore to the emergence of deregulated systems.

In the context of these changes, and focusing on the case of Channel Four Television as in some ways symptomatic for the working through of these changes, the purpose of this paper is to explore two views:

- (i) that Channel Four in both its institutional structures and in its programme provision has made a distinctive and positive contribution to the practices of broadcasting in Britain and internationally;
- (ii) that the introduction of a deregulated broadcasting environment will have a beneficial effect on broadcasting generally, and serves as the guarantor of innovation and sensitivity to consumer preferences in particular.

In the six years of its existence Channel Four has achieved a high international reputation, being compared favourably with the innovative achievements of institutions like ZDF in West Germany and INA in France.² Like the rest of British broadcasting it now faces major changes. The purpose of this article, in considering the two views outlined above, is to explore the 'conditions of existence' of this channel, and to consider the extent to which its present cultural identity is dependent upon those conditions. It makes two basic assumptions: first that, whatever its short-comings, Channel Four has significantly and usefully extended the range of political ideas and cultural forms available through television; and second, that it has introduced a new model of production which *potentially* facilitates the expression of this wide range of ideas.

The Channel Four Television Company Limited: Regulation and Innovation

In November 1982 Channel Four became only the fourth, and to date the last network television channel to go on the air. While television viewing in Britain is a popular activity – in May 1988 average adult weekly viewing was just over twenty five hours – it is a service that has expanded slowly.

The first BBC channel began transmitting in 1936, closed down during the war and only resumed transmission in 1946; the BBC was and still is financed by a compulsory annual licence fee, payable by all owners of television sets. The second (and first advertising-financed) channel, named Independent Television or ITV, began transmitting in 1955. The third channel, BBB-2, followed in 1964; the fourth, after a gap of eighteen years, in 1982. Like ITV, Channel Four is financed by advertising revenue.

² For information on ZDF and INA see G Hartnoll and V Porter (eds), *Alternative Filmmaking in Television: ZDF: A Helping Hand*, British Film Institute, London, 1982; and J Forbes (ed), *INA – French for Innovation*, BFI, 1984.

Public Service Broadcasting: Channel Four's Parliamentary Remit and Funding Base

³ *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC* (the 'Peacock Report'), London, HMSO, 1986, p6.

⁴ *ibid*, p7; *Broadcasting Act*, 1981, Part 2.

⁵ Anthony Smith, 'The National Television Foundation - A Plan for the Fourth Channel', a paper presented to the Annan Committee in 1974 and reprinted in Anthony Smith, *The Shadow in the Cave*, London, Quartet Books, 1976.

⁶ For a detailed and useful account of these debates see Simon Blanchard, 'Where do new channels come from?', S Blanchard and D Morley (eds), in *What's This Channel Four?*, London, Comedia, 1982.

The key to understanding the distinctive character of Channel Four lies first in having some knowledge of broadcasting policy in Britain prior to 1982, and second in grasping the relationship *in practice* between its Parliamentary remit, its method and quantity of funding, its way of acquiring programmes, its regulatory environment and relationship to other channels, and the enthusiasm and commitment of its personnel. Its conditions of existence could not be easily reproduced elsewhere.

We might summarise the pre-history of Channel Four as, briefly and simply, the history of the concept and practice of 'public service broadcasting' (PSB). Beginning with radio in the 1920s, PSB is based on the fact of spectrum and channel scarcity and elaborates the principles of broadcasting as a national asset to be used 'for the national good rather than for the benefit of particular interest groups', where broadcasting authorities act as 'trustees for the national interest' and, while subject ultimately to parliamentary authority, remain 'free of Government intervention in their day to day affairs'.³ PSB further elaborates the principle of universal provision, or, more precisely, of geographic universality and availability, and in the case of both the BBC and the ITV system as regulated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), operates as a public service to 'disseminate information, education and entertainment', with programmes that 'maintain a high general standard . . . and a proper balance and wide range in their subject matter'.⁴ There is also a requirement of 'due impartiality' on matters of public controversy.

It would not be appropriate here to rehearse the detailed, often controversial and highly-charged debates concerning the future of British broadcasting which developed both inside and outside the broadcasting community and industry in the 1970s, and were at least partly associated with the investigations and findings of the Annan Report (1977). But two of the main issues to emerge must be noted, both based on dissatisfaction with the existing channels. The first was a call for the new channel to operate outside the existing 'duopoly' of the BBC and IBA as a kind of publishing house, absolved of the normal requirements to produce a balanced evening's viewing, and as one influential writer put it, 'wedded to a different doctrine . . . of *openness* rather than to balance, to expression rather than to neutralisation'.⁵ And second, a widely-held view that British broadcasting had become boring, complacent, routinised and bland and that the new channel should therefore be open to new voices and new ways of doing things; that it should be committed to experiment and innovation in both the form and content of programmes.⁶

It was out of this climate of thoughtful, lively and detailed criticism of existing television, and as a consequence of the successful challenge to the view of the ITV companies that the new channel should be an 'ITV 2', that the brief but distinctive remit was drawn up and translated into

legislation: the Broadcasting Act of 1980. However, with the change of government from Labour to Conservative in 1979, the Annan proposals for an Open Broadcasting Authority, separate from the BBC and the IBA and funded out of a mixture of institutional sponsorship (Arts Council, Open University, charities) advertising and government grant, were not accepted. The new channel was thus to be regulated by the IBA and to be entirely financed by advertising revenue. However, the precise mechanism that was arrived at for collecting this revenue is significant – that ITV companies were permitted to sell the advertising airtime on the new channel and then paid an annual subscription agreed with the IBA to meet the channel's production and administrative costs. Since this subscription largely came out of the excess profits tax or 'levy' paid by the companies, and since the arrangement allowed them to continue to set and control the prices for advertising airtime, the interests of the ITV shareholders were carefully protected. But this method also had benefits for the Channel Four Company, since by keeping the advertisers at one remove from the channel it insulated programme and scheduling policy from direct advertiser pressure, gave the channel a 'breathing space' until such time as its advertising revenue income might meet its programme production costs, and helped to encourage a degree of complementary scheduling policy as between ITV and Channel Four. Thus complementarity and co-operation, not competition, were the order of the day. Moreover, Channel Four, being a wholly-owned subsidiary of the IBA, had no shareholders to protect and suffered no pressure to maximise profits through either competition for higher ratings or an exclusive orientation towards higher income audiences.

Although advertisers have complained bitterly, and with some justification, about ITV monopoly control of the sale of airtime, there have been advantages to them in the creation of a stable system with predictable access to both mass and specialist audiences. The advantage to programme-makers has been in offering a reasonably secure financial basis for programme production through a limitation on the number and type of channels (two) across which advertising revenue is spread. All of this will change, of course, with the advent of new advertising-based satellite channels and in the context of a European-wide television market. Channel Four's own estimate is that it has taken five years to build up advertising revenue to the point where it covers the production and associated costs of a relatively cheaply-funded national channel: 1987 is noted as the first year in which Net Advertising Revenue (NAR) on the channel exceeds the ITV/IBA agreed subscription amount.⁷ The future, of course, with a proliferation of advertising revenue-based channels, is uncertain. The Peacock Report (1986) was predicting annual TV advertising growth rates in the early 1980s of 8.3 per cent; in the first half of 1987 the rate in fact increased by 12.1 per cent, but this was before the stockmarket crash of October.

Since the publication of the recommendations of the Peacock Report

⁷ For details see Channel Four, *Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31st March 1987*, p10.

⁸ *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, op cit, p144.

⁹ *Channel Four, Report and Accounts*, 1987, op cit, p3.

¹⁰ Cited in S Blanchard, 'Where do new channels come from?', op cit, p22, from the Broadcasting Act 1980, consolidated into the Broadcasting Act 1981.

in 1986, much of the public and private debate concerning the future of Channel Four has revolved around whether or not it should sell its own airtime, and be separated from the IBA. On this subject, unlike many others, the Peacock Report was tentative, recommending that:

*Channel Four should be given the option of selling its own advertising time and would then no longer be funded by a subscription from the ITV companies. The implication of this recommendation is that Channel Four would no longer be a subsidiary of the IBA. We would, however, still wish to see Channel Four offering complementary services.*⁸

The hesitancy may indicate an awareness of the contradictions involved in setting up the channel as a separate, profit-making, competitive company but in then expecting it to co-operate, not compete.

Programming Policy

The preceding section has dealt with the manner in which Channel Four's revenue is raised and with some of the implications of this method for programming policy and non-competitive scheduling. A later section will deal in more detail with programme costings. However, it is now important to explore the distinctive relationship between the channel's financial base and its programming policy as specified in the parliamentary remit – about which much concern has been expressed and much ink spilt. In particular, in the aftermath of Peacock, the Channel Four Board itself has expressed the concern that 'any new arrangements ensured the maintenance of the existing remit'.⁹

So, what of the remit and of the new vision in British broadcasting which it seeks modestly to codify? In respect of structure, the Act specified the IBA's responsibility for setting up the channel; its following three provisions set out a philosophy for programme content, and are worth quoting in full:

- (a) *to ensure that the programmes contain a suitable proportion of matter calculated to appeal to tastes and interests not generally catered for by ITV;*
- (b) *to ensure that a suitable proportion of the programmes are of an educational nature;*
- (c) *to encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes, and generally to give the Fourth Channel Service a distinctive character of its own.*¹⁰

Prior to the passing of the Act, there were influential statements of policy in other places which helped to form the climate of opinion within which the legislation was framed. Two are worth noting here since they point to a then-emerging consensus concerning significant absences or gaps in British television, the importance of creativity and innovation, a genuine desire to extend the range of views able to achieve

public expression, and a recognition of the desirability of extending the range and type of programme suppliers. First, the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, in a speech made to the Royal Television Society, noted that the IBA would be:

*... expected to develop a distinctive service on the fourth channel. Within existing rules on taste, decency and the like ... to give new opportunities to creative people in British TV and to add new and greater satisfactions to those now available to the viewer ... to find new ways of serving minority and specialised audiences and to give due place to innovation ... not to allow rivalry for ratings between the two channels ...*¹¹

In addition, and of key importance for subsequent developments, the Home Secretary stated that, 'the largest practicable proportion' of programmes should come from independent producers, and that the IBA must ensure that 'those companies which have networking rights on ITV-1 have much less time on the fourth channel.'¹² Second, the IBA in its own proposals for the channel noted a wish to extend the spectrum not only of opinions but also of assumptions permitted to receive a public airing; with more airtime available the scope was opened up to 'allow controlled encouragement to be given to the presentation of a wider range of opinions and assumptions.'¹³ The uneasy paternalism of the phrase 'controlled encouragement' indicates both one of the weaknesses of British policy, its tendency to frightened illiberalism, and one of its strengths, namely, the provision through regulation of the necessary conditions (not simply pious wishes) for diversity of expression. Selected examples of and debates about innovative programming on Channel Four follow in a later section. The intention of this section has been to establish the financial and policy basis for such work.

Commissioning and Financing Programmes

Perhaps the main structural legacy of the apparently discounted Annan Report was its concept of a broadcasting institution that was more like a chain of cinemas than a film studio; or to use the Report's own metaphor, an institution that, like a publishing house, commissions, assembles and publishes material made outside its own walls. This is the method adopted by Channel Four which commissions the vast bulk of its material 'out of house', and whose 'Commissioning Editors' scrutinise proposals and issue contracts to deliver a specified programme at an agreed price. Novel though this method has been in British broadcasting (where BBC and ITV companies alike have doubled up, in a system of vertical integration, to function as both producers and distributors), it should in fact be seen to reflect broader, international trends in industrial and commercial practice and in political policy. Such trends include the encouragement by multinational corporations of sub-contracting and 'flexible specialisation'¹⁴ and the emergence of a

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp18-19; the speech was delivered in September 1979.

¹² *ibid.* The point about programme suppliers is especially significant in view of the fact that the Peacock Report was to recommend seven years later, in the now famous Recommendation 8: 'The BBC and ITV should be required over a ten year period to increase to not less than 40% the proportion of programmes supplied by independent producers.' *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, *op cit.*, p142.

¹³ *The Fourth Channel, The Authority's Proposals* (1979), cited in S Blanchard, *op cit.*, p20, and reprinted in the IBA's *Annual Report and Accounts, 1979-80*.

¹⁴ For some discussion of these issues see, for example, S Lash and J Urry, *The End of Organised Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987.

'New Right' committed to reviving the free market by releasing it from the demands of organised labour and from the 'cushioning' effects of social welfare and public subsidy policies.

While the responsibility for delivering a product on time and within budget rests with the suppliers, the channel retains, through the commissioning process, a firm 'gate-keeping' function. Though it has been suggested that since there are fewer gatekeepers than in other channels, and since they are at a greater physical distance from the producers, the dead (or hyperactive) hand of Executive Producer bureaucracy weighs less heavily, and less normatively, on the activities of creative personnel. It may also be important, and only fair to say, that the commissioning personnel at the channel were themselves assembled on the basis of a commitment to innovate, creative and, where necessary, risk-taking programme-making.

Since the channel's beginnings there has been much debate about the percentage of programme making to be allocated to independent (i.e. non-ITV) producers; the channel itself has been at pains to argue that it both has and will recognise and foster this sector, its 1987 Report noting that the independents had provided 25 per cent of the hours of programme transmission for 48 per cent of programme production costs. This compares with a 30 per cent allocation of hours to ITV and ITN. Since concern has also been expressed by the independents (vigorously organised through the Independent Programme Producers' Association, IPPA) that there will be concentration of commissions in fewer hands, the channel has also published the annual totals of independent companies with whom it has contracts (in 1984, 281 companies; by 1987, 360 companies).

However, since this kind of sub-contracting offers a form of 'seasonal' employment with considerably less predictability and reliability than the cyclical recurrence of grape harvesting and hop-picking (though much better paid), it is unsurprising that the independents, a new 'reserve army of labour' in broadcasting, have maintained a watchful and vigorous lobby in relationship to Channel Four, and have, with the winds of change from Peacock behind them, opened new and effective lobbies for contracting-out at the BBC and ITV.

While the removal of regulatory controls in broadcasting and its 'opening up' to international markets does not necessarily entail the sub-contracting of intellectual labour, through the casualisation of independent producers, nonetheless it is the case that capitalist free markets in the late twentieth century have tended increasingly to adopt this practice under highly competitive conditions. Quite apart from the issue of whether the markets are, in the longer term, capitalist or socialist, in a broadcasting system *generally* characterised by security of employment, there is an important place for creative access policies which might include some of the principles at the heart of what is now called 'independent production'. However, it would be naive to ignore the role of the 'gatekeepers', who in a deregulated and privately-owned system

might be expected to act as newspaper editors and book and record distributors, currently act in ways which limit choice and exclude certain views. Moreover, the general policy of sub-contracting which brings insecurity to the producers needs to be scrutinised carefully, especially if this policy were to be extended to the broadcasting system as a whole. For although it *may* lower the cost of the product to the consumer, most consumers are also, in part of their life, producers and could not in the long term accede to social policies on employment which would make their own lives certainly insecure and possibly miserable. It would be difficult to imagine any true form of 'independence' that did not include the material conditions for its own survival and reproduction.

It remains to establish some basic points about the level and type of financing of programmes at Channel Four. The basic structure of costs (that is the relative costs of making different types of programmes) is fairly typical for the industry, but importantly, at present, organised in such a way as to realise the channel's programming brief. The two most expensive areas of programme production are Drama (including Film on Four) and Entertainment; followed, in a way that reflects the brief, by Documentaries, Education and News, and with significant but smaller support for the areas of Arts, Independent Film and Video (the 'Eleventh Hour') and Multicultural Programming (for details of 1987 costs and programme output, see Appendix 1).

Before any conclusions are drawn about the implications of Channel Four's practice for future developments in broadcasting, it is especially important to see its output and costs in relationship to the other three channels. The calculations listed in the table that follows make clear that this is a relatively cheaply-funded channel, with a significantly higher proportion of 'acquired' (that is, bought in, not originally produced) material than any of the other channels. To this should also be added a point about the extensive 're-cycling' of material, since over 20 per cent of what is shown is a repeat screening either of the channel's own product or of programmes already shown on ITV (repeats in 1987 were 940 hours out of a total of 4,160 hours). The output figures for BBC and ITV exclude regional programmes, local news, etc, and this gives a slightly unfair 'skew' to the average per-hour production costs. Nonetheless, it is clear that the BBC's costs are significantly more than Channel Four's, though their percentage of originally generated material at 83.9 per cent compares very favourably with the Channel Four figure of 55 per cent.

The most astonishing figures in the table are probably those for the ITV system, where the advertising revenue base allows, theoretically (though not in practice), almost five times as much available revenue for programme production. It is in the shadow of this wealthy giant, and on the basis of specific legislative and regulatory protection, that Channel Four has been able to flourish, has almost single-handedly kept alive the British film industry, and won praise in Britain and internationally for innovative and creative programme-making.

Channel Four Costs and Output Compared with Other Channels

		Average costs per hour (£)	Audience share %	% Original material	% Acquired material	Income (£m)	Output in hours (annual)
C4	('87)	32,866	8.2%	55%	45%	136m	4,138
BBC 1&2	('86)	60,365	52.4% ¹	83.9%	16.1%	638m ²	10,569 ³
ITV	('87)	161,817	39.4%	70%	30%	901m ⁴	5,568 ³

Note:

Figures for C4 and ITV are for 1986-87, for the BBC 1985-86.

'Average costs' have been arrived at by dividing output hours into income; these figures should not be confused with actual programme costs.

Calculations are based on figures obtained from: the IBA *Independent Television in the 1990s* (1988), the Channel Four output figure given here is the IBA one; the BBC *Annual Report and Handbook* (1987), figures for the year 1985-86; *Broadcast*, May 20, 1988, for audience % share figures; *Yorkshire Television Holdings PLC Offer for Sale* (1986) for the ITV figure on % acquired material.

BBC 1 and BBC 2 are combined here because of the difficulty of disaggregating their costs from the figures available in the BBC Handbook.

1. The audience share figures are taken from *Broadcast*, May 20, 1988, and are that week's figures, not an annual average. BBC 1 audience share is 35.9%, BBC 2 share is 16.5%.
2. BBC total licence fee and other income for 1985-86, for television and radio, was £863 million; of this 62% was spent on television and 6% on re-equipping, I have therefore estimated 'available income' for TV at 68% of the total income. The total licence fee and other income for 1986-87 was £968 million.
3. Network hours only.
4. Based on Net Advertising Revenue of £1,256 million for 1987 less subscription fees for C4 and the Welsh Fourth Channel, the Exchequer Levy and IBA rental charges.

The other side of the fashionable coin of economy and efficiency is that there are areas where the channel operates under a handicap: in undertaking ambitious, international co-productions; in initiating major drama series (though it has made important contributions in this field, notably with the development of the low-budget feature film); in programmes of sustained investigative journalism; in news, where it is deeply dependent upon ITN. Finally, although Channel Four is a relatively 'low budget' institution, it does not project a low budget image to its audience, which says a great deal for the skill and imagination of its editors and programme-makers in using minimal resources to great effect.

The Audiences for Channel Four

There are inextricable connections between audiences, budgets and the remit, as advertisers and programme-makers alike will confirm. Without the requirement of the remit to schedule in complementary not competitive fashion, to meet audience needs not met elsewhere, to devote peak viewing-time and financial resources to programmes with quite small and/or specialist audiences (whether *The Business Programme*, *The Sharp End*, the seven o'clock *News*, *Bandung File* or a host of others),

Channel Four would be greatly tempted, with its advantage derived from extremely efficient budgeting systems, to compete in the mainstream ratings market.

As it is, and quite correctly, the channel has sold itself as television 'for all of the people some of the time', in the words of its first Chief Executive, Jeremy Isaacs. What is perhaps extraordinary is the great cultural impact that it has had, not only on audiences but on the practices of other channels, in a situation where after six years it now has around 8 per cent of the viewing audience. The important point about this phenomenon is that unlike the world of newspaper buying, where people tend to stay loyal to the brand they know, in the world of four channel broadcasting the majority of people tune in to Channel Four at some time each week (74 per cent of the audience) or each month (91 per cent of the audience). Moreover, there does seem to be an important factor of quality or degree of audience appreciation, especially from viewers who previously had felt that television had nothing to offer them. This is important from the standpoint of cultural provision and participation, but it is also a matter of interest to advertisers; Channel Four has been especially successful, for example, in reaching the audience of sixteen to twenty-four year-olds. The point about cultural impact not being directly related to audience viewing figures is also strikingly reinforced by the comment made by Michael Grade, newly-arrived Chief Executive at Channel Four, who declared, 'You don't rewrite a hit'. The idea of the 'hit' as signifying numerical popularity is amazingly reconstructed here, by the person who had just left the BBC where *EastEnders* was (and is) regularly coming at 'Number One' in the programme charts, and had moved across to the channel whose most popular programme, *Treasure Hunt* at around Number Fifty-Five is followed by *Brookside* at around Number Seventy in the top One Hundred. In April 1988 the audience for *EastEnders* was at around nineteen million, for *Treasure Hunt* at around seven million and for *Brookside* at around 5.5 million. The audience for *Brookside* is thus higher than that for another piece of entertainment, the *Sun* newspaper, Britain's highest circulation daily at around four million; the Channel Four *News* at seven o'clock, with an audience of around 0.75 million, compares favourably with circulation figures for the *Guardian* newspaper at 0.47 million and the *Financial Times* at just under 0.3 million. Figures for ITV and BBC 1 news are of course higher (respectively 7.7 and 7.5 million).¹⁵

In the sphere of cultural provision and influence the numbers game is a dangerous one to play (how many people read *The Wealth of Nations* or *Capital*?), whether by programmers, politicians or advertisers. Nonetheless, a few more figures may serve as general points of orientation for the discussion of particular programmes which follows. Film on Four's biggest success in 1986-87 was Julie Walters in *She'll Be Wearing Pink Pyjamas* with an audience of 7.6 million. Programmes like *Hill Street Blues* (4.1 million) and *The Cosby Show* (4 million) have also been popular.¹⁶ The early Saturday evening *Right to Reply* programme has, like

¹⁵ Figures for *EastEnders*, *Brookside*, *News at Ten* (ITV) and the *Nine O'Clock News* (BBC) come from *Broadcast*, April 29, 1988; newspaper circulation figures come from the Audit Bureau of Circulations for October 1987 to March 1988, published in the *Media Guardian*, May 9, 1988. The Channel Four *News* estimated figure comes from Jeremy Isaacs, 'Media in the Market Place', *New Socialist*, no 54, March-April 1988, p8.

¹⁶ The *Film on Four* figure comes from the *C4 Report* for 1987. The other two figures come from *Broadcast*, May 20, 1988.

¹⁷ From information supplied by Channel Four.

the Channel Four *News*, an audience of around 0.75 million; the late Monday night experimental 'Eleventh Hour' slot has audiences of between 0.3 and 2.5 million; the community documentary 'People to People' slot reaches between 0.5 and 1.6 million; the first season of *The Media Show* was reaching between half a million and a million people.¹⁷ The largest regular audiences, as already noted, come to *Brookside* with an audience of around five and a half million. Assessed in cultural terms it may be that the most important thing about Channel Four has been the requirement placed on it *not* to chase ratings. This has allowed it the unusual accomplishment in late twentieth-century television of both working at the leading edge of audio-visual experiment and holding on to the popular touch.

Channel Four and Innovation: The Programmes

All that will be attempted here is a brief exploration of the concept of innovation in programme-making, together with a few selected examples. Such a process of selection is clearly invidious, and not intended to offer a representative sample of the output of the channel as a whole.

First, however we should note the danger that in a cultural field, which is also an industrial field, innovation will be thought of exclusively in terms of technological change and development. The intention here is not to reverse the error by failing to recognise the real importance of developments in cable, satellite, camera and editing technology, computerised programming and so forth, but simply to state that, at the end of the day, it is the meanings that are made in this industry, and expressed through particular combinations of images and sounds, that attract, hold and give pleasure to audiences.

Second, innovation can also be thought of in terms of working practices and industrial relations, and the channel's distinctive character in this respect, as commissioner and awarder of contracts, not employer, has already been referred to. Although Channel Four operates, in general, in accordance with agreements reached with the various media unions, its structure allows it to 'off-load' both industrial relations problems and, to some extent, the research and development costs associated with the early generation and preparation of programme ideas. Having called into being a new sector of freelance independent producers, it is in a good position to benefit from a large pool of programme ideas and talent, at least in the short term. However, this same structure of contract and casualised labour relations makes it difficult to hold the steady allegiance of producers or to foster the development of creative personnel over a long period of time. And as suppliers fight the daily and yearly battle for survival, there is a danger of collective disillusionment setting in, of enthusiasms waning and ideas drying up.

But it is through the programmes themselves, and not the way they are made or financed, that viewers judge achievement and innovative

practice and potential. It may be useful to consider examples in relationship to three aspects of innovation:

- (i) new genres and programme formats
- (ii) new contents of expression or new 'voices'
- (iii) new modes, forms or styles of expression.

Of course, in any one example all three modalities of innovation may be present. There is, for example, a scene in the documentary *They Haven't Done Nothing* (1985, tx. July 7) by the Liverpool Black Media Group, where a dub poet, standing on a street corner, directly addresses the audience in the rhythmical language of his poem, on the subject of property, poverty and theft. The combination of boldly opinionated comment, poetic language and direct address shifts the boundaries of that mode of expression that is the documentary genre, as well as adding to the repertoire of forms available for expression. At the level of content, because this is the speech of a black person, representing the experiences of black people in Liverpool's Toxteth, something is added to the list of contents previously dominated by the speech of white strangers, those teams of documentary, news and current affairs personnel making unexpected trips to 'riot-torn Liverpool'.

In the first category, concerning new formats in television, we may place such programmes as *Opinions*, *Comment*, *Right to Reply* and the *News* itself. *Opinions* was an innovative thirty-minute format, offering controversial figures of the day the opportunity to address the audience, without interruption or question, on a subject of their choice. The skill required for this trick has involved the sort of balancing-out of opinions in order to keep both the IBA and the Government satisfied if not happy; speakers have included Germaine Greer and Enoch Powell, with a controversial public relations 'coup' being attached to the invitation to E P Thompson, renowned historian and anti-nuclear campaigner, when the BBC had just withdrawn their invitation to him to give the prestigious Richard Dimbleby Lecture. *Comment* is a three-minute slot, placed just after the main news and offering a striking generic contrast to the professional impartiality of television newscasting. Unlike *Opinions*, this space is opened up also to the unfamous, to speak for three minutes on a topical subject.

Right to Reply, in the context of public and parliamentary campaigns to obtain a legal right of reply for people who feel that they have been misrepresented by the press, is perhaps the most significant of the new genres offered by Channel Four. Since there seem in the world of public service broadcasting, unlike the press, to be *relatively* few instances of people feeling that they have been wilfully misrepresented or even abused, the *Right to Reply* takes a broader, more critical and exploratory approach than the simple correction of error. Presented by Gus MacDonald from 1982 to 1988, and currently by Linda Agran, it is a series as old as the channel itself, and in some ways at the heart of its concerns, seeking to provide a public space for viewers to make critical comments on Channel Four (and now also other ITV) programmes. The

programme team, with the support of the channel as a whole, tries to ensure the presence of producers from the programme in question, so that viewers can make their criticisms and ask their questions directly of those responsible. A fair amount of effort and time also goes into selecting and lining up extracts from the programmes complained about, which gives the discussion, at least potentially, a useful 'edge' of precision. There seems to be a genuine institutional commitment to assisting viewers in pursuing their argument, since the brief of the presenter is largely to act in the role of advocate or supporter for the viewer, in the discussion. And for that majority of the viewing population who do not live either in or within easy reaching distance of London, and who could not afford to take time off work to travel to the London studios, there are now seven Channel Four 'Video Boxes' around the country, where viewers can record their comments (in London, Glasgow, Birmingham, York, Bradford, Bristol and Oxford). Although the programme has succeeded in placing the issue of audience feedback more firmly on the broadcasting agenda, its principles now need to be refined, extended and developed across the broadcasting system as a whole, if there is to be any qualitative advance in recognising, and responding to, audience criticism.

It may seem strange to include the Channel Four seven o'clock *News* (especially a *News* supplied by the ITV supplier ITN) in a list of generically innovative work. But one simple and important point must be made: unlike the BBC nine o'clock and the ITV ten o'clock *News*, each normally only half an hour in length, Channel Four allocates an hour and therefore provides the basic conditions for a deeper, more thoughtful and more analytical approach to news presentation. Consequently, the Channel Four *News* seems to be able to begin to break out of that 'bias against understanding' which has been usefully identified as one of the more problematic features of TV news. It has taken some courage to hold on to this format and to this time slot.

If the *News* has extended what it is possible to achieve in this genre, and has opened up a new and more challenging dimension of professional reporting within the ethic of impartiality, what both *Opinions* and *Comment* have done is to foreground issues of judgment and interpretation within this broader landscape of editorial impartiality. The complexities of subjectivity, partial and purposeful perception, have thus begun to complement the older principles of facticity, neutrality and objectivity, with a powerful ripple effect that extends across the whole of public service broadcasting and all of its genres. The combination of 'telling it like it is' with the refinement and specification of 'where you're coming from', has often also resulted in the production of far more engaging, interesting and stimulating programmes; the competing interpretations of Welsh history offered in the series *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* are perhaps a good example of this.

In the swiftly evolving and changing language of public service documentary there have been corresponding shifts involving a fore-

grounding, and problematising, of the relationship between programme-makers and their subjects. The mediating role of programme-makers and their relative closeness to or distance from their subjects has thus been more adequately recognised as an issue in documentary production. And the concept of 'the indignity of speaking for others'¹⁸ has usefully challenged the view that only professional detachment can guarantee truthfulness. Such programmes as *The Bandung File* and the *People to People* series of community documentaries have pioneered a variety of techniques for facilitating the process of self-representation. Examples here might include the concrete recognition of multi-culturalism in *Bandung's* use of sub-titles for Bengali language speakers in London's Tower Hamlets (*Taking the Lid Off*, tx. August 1, 1987), and the absence of editorial voice-over in two documentaries made from the point of view of the Yorkshire miners during the 1984-85 Miners' Strike (*Coal not Dole* tx. June 4, 1984; *Here We Go* tx. March 5, 1985). Regionally-based film and video workshops, operating under special union agreements and sustaining long term, closer and more accountable relationships to local communities, have also contributed to this process of reconstituting the documentary mode (for example, the Birmingham Film and Video Workshop's *Giro - Is This the Modern World?* tx. July 14, 1985; Ceddo's *The People's Account* which is under an IBA ban and has not yet been transmitted; Liverpool Open Eye's *The World Has a Way of Looking at People* tx. August 17, 1986; these involved work with, respectively, a group of young people in Birmingham, tenants of the Broadwater Farm Estate in London and mentally-handicapped people in Liverpool)¹⁹.

Finally, as an example of programmes which have developed new genres for television, we might cite the *Media Show*. While other channels have developed programmes about the cinema or, to a lesser extent, about television, these have tended to operate within the conventions of the relatively superficial and impressionistic 'review' format. The *Media Show* (first series tx. March 18, 1987), and its predecessor *Visions*, have attempted a more ambitious, critical and thematically-based approach to contemporary media issues, exploring a range of topics from the development of cinema in Africa, to the discussions at a conference on 'television in the small country' and the growth of financial services advertising. The *Media Show* has also pioneered a lively and accessible style which, in conjunction with careful and imaginative research, has allowed it to cover a wide variety of media-related issues.

In the category of new contents of expression or new 'voices' a variety of examples can be cited, from the very existence of the separate Welsh language fourth channel (Sianel 4 Cymru), to a variety of programmes and series by and for women²⁰, a season of gay and lesbian films in 1986 and a forthcoming series in this area, 'Out on Tuesday', seasons of African, Latin American, Arab and Chinese films, a long-running series of programmes about the Indian cinema, and a body of new work by black British film-makers, working in both fiction and documentary. All of

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, cited in Conrad Lodziak, *The Power of Television: A Critical Appraisal*, London, Francis Pinter, 1986, p201.

¹⁹ For more detailed information on these and other programmes see two C4 publications: *World's Together*, Channel Four Multicultural Programming (1988), and *The Work of Channel Four's Independent Film and Video Department: Eleventh Hour, People to People, Workshops* (1986).

²⁰ For further information on these see Jane Root, *Pictures of Women: Sexuality*, London, Pandora, 1984; and Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer (eds), *Boxed In: Women and Television*, London, Pandora, 1987; in particular Helen Baehr and Angela Spindler-Brown, 'Firing a Broadside: a feminist intervention into mainstream TV'.

these examples have helped to push British television beyond the narrow boundaries of a normative and sometimes repressive mono-culturalism and have laid the foundations for a richer and more respectful cultural internationalism.

The category of formal innovation is in some respects difficult to separate out from instances of format innovation, and includes both more popular, and more specialised or more 'difficult' work, from *Max Headroom* and *The Comic Strip Presents* to seasons of the work of Jean-Luc Godard (Eleventh Hour, tx. July 15-August 12, 1985) and examples of work by British, European and North American experimental filmmakers and video artists. There have also been examples of films working at the edge of the documentary genre, with a mixture of factual and lyrical material (for example Black-Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs*, tx. July 6, 1987, and the Cuban film *Prayer*, tx. June 30, 1986); films working within the fictional mode, but with the use of non-actors (Amber Film's *Seacoal*, tx. April 21, 1986), and films developing a mixed documentary and fiction format or playing with established fictional genres (Birmingham Film and Video Workshop's *Property Rites*, tx. March 25, 1985, Steel Bank's *Security*, tx. May 16 1988, Amber's *T Dan Smith*, tx. February 22, 1988). The Eleventh Hour slot, in particular, has had a commitment to showing material which experiments with and reconstructs the established audio-visual languages of cinema and television, and to providing a public (albeit 'late night') space for previously marginalised voices and cultures.

While it would be a mistake to offer automatic endorsement to all things new or experimental in the audio-visual sphere, there does seem to have been general agreement in the late 1970s that British television was in need of fresh forms and new voices. Arguments for greater openness and for the acceptance and public exhibition of a wider range of ideas, forms and formats won the day, and were transmuted into the legislative remit: 'to encourage innovation and experiment in the form and content of programmes'. But this remit was subsequently realised within a very particular economic and regulatory environment. In the late 1980s that environment is changing and present government policies are clearly committed to the creation of international free markets in broadcasting, and to the kinds of deregulation that will make this possible.

The last section of this paper will therefore briefly consider the arguments for a deregulated broadcasting environment, and will consider also the implications of some of the changes proposed for Channel Four's ability to carry out its original parliamentary brief, and to meet the needs of its audiences through continuing programme innovation.

Deregulation, Innovation and the 'Public Sphere'

Advocates of a deregulated, free market system argue that public sub-

sidy and public regulation are inefficient, unnecessary and paternalistic: inefficient, in that public subsidy distorts costings and encourages waste; unnecessary in that free markets, allowing competition between producers, naturally develop in such a way as to meet the declared preferences of consumers, as expressed through the price mechanism; and paternalistic in that sovereign consumers must be free to make their own choices without direction from authorities claiming to know what is good for them. Principled deregulators are also against the creation or maintenance of monopolies, and against all forms of state censorship; as the Peacock Report puts it:

*Prepublication censorship, whether of printed material, plays, films, broadcasting or other creative activities or expressions of opinion, has no place in a free society and we would want to advise Government and Parliament to embark forthwith on a phased programme for ending it.*²¹

The Government's recent establishment of a new 'Broadcasting Standards Council' might be seen as a rejection, in practice, of this particular piece of advice.

On the whole, deregulators believe that the present system of British broadcasting is unnecessarily restrictive and that it reduces choice; they see public regulation as an unwelcome consequence of channel scarcity and welcome the proliferation of channels promised by the new technologies of cable and satellite. They object to the kind of protectionism that prevents or impedes international trade in broadcasting, and cite the model of book and newspaper publishing as an instance of the free market sustaining great diversity and offering considerable consumer choice. It must also be noted, however, that there are significant differences of position within the deregulators' 'camp'. The Peacock Report, for example, clear in its general commitment to deregulation, nonetheless rejects a simplistic *laissez-faire* approach and advocates a system of public subsidy in order to retain the present qualities of public service broadcasting. Recognising also the high standards, relatively low costs and creative 'packaging' of diverse types of programmes characteristic of the present system, the Report notes a concern that 'we do not prematurely dismantle or destroy the "packaged" terrestrial broadcasting services that give good value today.'²² For deregulators the single major obstacle to freeing the market at present is the absence of a price mechanism through which consumers can express their preferences. The example most often cited here is that of the BBC licence fee, where it is argued that the BBC is guaranteed this income whether or not it satisfies its viewers; they are not able to register dissatisfaction by discontinuing payment for the service. The only truly satisfactory mechanism for ensuring customer sovereignty, it is argued, would be the adoption of a 'pay per view' system; only this would allow viewers to register their preferences in a detailed and sensitive way. Peacock's major recommendation for the

²¹ *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, op cit, p150.

²² *ibid*, p131.

BBC in the longer term, therefore, is (not as some had expected, that it should take advertising to help cover its costs) but that 'well before the end of the century' subscription should replace the licence fee. The signals would be transmitted in scrambled form and only subscribers would have access to the necessary decoding equipment. And people would choose whether or not to subscribe to the service.

In respect of television there are a number of specific objections that can be made to the views of the deregulators. First, it can be argued that the removal of the 'balance' regulation in broadcasting would result in the kind of decisive political partisanship (pro-Conservative) that currently characterises the mass circulation free press, and to the denial of finance and facilities for the expression of alternative views. Moreover, comparisons with the free market of publishing tend to underestimate both the effects of increasingly monopolistic control, and the significantly higher entry and revenue costs for television production. Second, it can be argued (despite the Peacock report's advocacy of the role of independent producers) that a deregulated system, with the lifting of any kind of investment controls, would quickly lead to a situation of monopoly control, and that this would both fix prices and prevent diversity of supply (in a situation comparable to that which applies today in the record and book industries where the distributors restrict the range of products that they are willing to carry). Third, the removal of the current requirement that broadcasters offer a complete range of types of programmes could result in a situation in which certain types of programmes would simply disappear (for example, expensive, labour intensive and controversial current affairs and investigative journalism; there is also a danger that relatively expensive indigenous drama would be replaced by cheaper, imported drama); a 'knock-on' consequence would be the exclusion of unpopular or minority views from the airwaves; and a less well-educated public at election time. Fourth, there is the danger, in a situation with a proliferation of channels and intensified competition for advertising revenue, that none of these channels will be able to produce adequate or quality programming, and that competition instead of raising standards and improving sensitivity to consumer needs will result in a lowering of standards and a general disenchantment with the medium itself. Fifth, while the argument about the insensitivity of the licence fee to audience responses and ability to pay is a good one, an alternative to subscription television would be to finance these channels out of general taxation, and to develop other, much more sensitive ways of registering viewer comments and preferences. Sixth, the desirability of an advertising revenue base must itself be questioned, since without a regulatory framework advertisers may exert unacceptable pressure on programme content and on the programming philosophy of a channel. And finally, it is likely that the introduction of price-sensitive, deregulated broadcasting systems would result in increasing divisions between the information and entertainment rich, and the information and entertainment poor; while the fragmentation that flows from a

proliferation of channels, combined with the economic exclusion of some from access, removes the possibility of public, communicative spaces for national and international debate and dialogue.

The removal or severe contraction of the public sphere of communications, where low personal income can become a barrier to entry, together with a narrowing in the range of publishable ideas, are two possible consequences of a deregulated broadcasting policy which are inimical to the development of a democratic society. If these dangers are not recognised we may find that the era of increasing 'openness' in socialist countries becomes, ironically, in capitalist societies the era of the underground electronic 'samizdat'; and, correspondingly, a new age of the 'blunt pen', to use Martin Luther King's phrase.

Channel Four was born out of a history of regulated, public service broadcasting, with a clearly specified public brief and a relatively secure financial base. Without this context its commitment to extended educational provision, to meeting cultural needs not catered for elsewhere in the television system, and to a process of experimentation and innovation in its programme production, would have collapsed within a few months.

Sheffield, June 12, 1988.

Appendix

Channel Four: Programme Costs and Output (by Type of Programme) 1986-87

These figures are 'ranked' in two tables in order to show both the categories of programming with the highest output in hours and the total costs of each of those categories.

I: Hours

1	Feature films & cartoons	951
2	Entertainment	705
3	Drama	536
4	Education	429
5	Sport	376
6	Documentaries	363
7	News	271
8	Current Affairs	249
9	Arts	128
10	11th Hour & Multicultural	101
11	Religion	51

II: Costs (£m)

1	Drama	23.2
2	Entertainment	19.4
3	Documentaries	10.9
4	Education	10.6
5	News	10.1
6	Current Affairs	8.4
7	Sport	6.2
8	Feature Films & cartoons	6.2
9	Arts	5.1
10	11th Hour & Multicultural	4.7
11	Religion	1.9

Source: Channel Four Television Company Ltd, *Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31st March 1987*, p9.

Afterword

Since this paper was written, the White Paper has appeared (*Broadcasting in the '90s: Competition, Choice and Quality*, HMSO, November, 1988). Of the three alternatives suggested here for Channel Four only one is likely to provide the necessary conditions for continuing to fulfil the 1980 Parliamentary remit:

Channel 4 could remain as a non-profit making body, in the form of a subsidiary of the ITC, and given freedom to raise funds through advertising, subscription and sponsorship. However, to avoid Channel 4 being wholly dependent on these sources, a minimum level of income could be guaranteed. This would provide a safeguard against any erosion of the remit which might otherwise arise as the competition for advertising and subscription revenue intensifies. (p25)

The ITC, or Independent Television Commission, is the body which Government is proposing should replace the Independent Broadcasting Authority.

In addition, since the writing of this paper, and regrettably, Channel Four has taken a decision to discontinue its 'People to People' strand of documentary programmes. This may signal a general shift in British broadcasting away from the resourcing of innovative and challenging documentary programmes.

Certainly in the fiercely increased competition for ratings which will inevitably be a feature of the new multi-channel environment, the documentary genre is likely to be among the first casualties.

I should like to thank Alan Fountain, Andrew Curry and Farrukh Dhondy for providing me with information about their programmes; Ginny Heath; Cinema Action for generous assistance with the research; the BFI Library for their excellent facilities; Sheffield City Council for the opportunity to look more closely at the economics of the cultural industries; and John Corner and Ros Brunt for helpful comments. Finally, thanks are due to the organisers of the International Television Studies Conference, London, 1988, where this paper was first presented.

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■ *spring 91*, "POSSIBLE" - "What really happened" is the object of the historian's craft, but what about all the events that never materialized because of contingent causes? Reflection on the possible pasts as a critique of the reification of the actual into the necessary.

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'A WEE TRENDY CHANNEL'

A REVIEW OF SOME RECENT LITERATURE ABOUT CHANNEL FOUR BY ANDREW HIGSON

¹ David Morrison, David Docherty and Michael Tracey, *Keeping Faith: Channel 4 and Its Audience*, London, John Libbey, 1988, p. 86. The phrase 'A wee trendy channel' comes from a discussion with an interviewee from Belfast quoted therein.

² *ibid.*, p. 1; subsequent quotations from this book will be acknowledged by a page reference in brackets; see also David Docherty and David Morrison '4: "... something different, but not too different"', *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1987-88, vol. 57 no. 1, which is an earlier and shorter version of the research report.

IN A NEW STUDY of Channel Four, *Keeping Faith: Channel 4 and its Audience*, by David Docherty, David Morrison and Michael Tracey of the Broadcasting Research Unit (BRU)¹, the authors write in the introduction that the channel has:

*taken on the mantle of a monumentally important symbol for how future television might be organised and produced. Other countries look to it for the lessons they might learn, and for clues on how to replace the traditional, centralised and monolithic structures of public broadcasting while retaining the public service ideal.*²

Given both the reputation that the channel has built up in its six-year existence, and its statutory remit to be innovative, experimental and in various ways distinctive as a broadcasting institution, it seems almost astonishing that there is so little in-depth critical analysis of its work. Unfortunately, *Keeping Faith* does not entirely fill the gaps. Like most of the existing writing on the subject, it is a useful impressionistic survey of the channel as a whole, grounded in an historical account of the genesis of Channel Four. What is new about it is that about half the book's 184 pages are devoted to analysing 'public opinion' about the channel. But, again like most of the existing literature, there is a real resistance to any rigorous exploration of the problems and achievements of either the scheduling or individual programmes or genres. This is, I suspect, because the book has been written at a time when the future of broadcasting in Britain is very much up for grabs by the free marketeers, and Channel Four is seen in need of urgent political protection and celebration of its project in order to secure its future as the currently most acceptable form of public service broadcasting. In other words, in the political arena, detailed analysis is seen as less useful than a more wide-ranging polemic about Channel Four's place in a democratic

broadcasting system.³ However, it must be recognised that such polemic is premised on the assumption that all is substantially well at the channel and that its remit is being carried out acceptably, particularly as far as audiences are concerned – after all, this is the age of consumer sovereignty. In this respect, of course, *Keeping Faith* is bound to fare well, since it is a report based on an extensive audience survey, of which more later. But it would be nice to see some detailed analyses of some of the output of Channel Four.

The history of the various debates which brought Channel Four into existence are now fairly well documented. As Sylvia Harvey notes in her article on Channel Four elsewhere in this issue, Simon Blanchard's essay in *What's This Channel Fo(u)r?* is useful in this respect; there is also Stephen Lambert's account of what he calls 'the complex history of motivations and pressures that brought about the establishment of the Channel 4 Television Company Ltd.' Harvey summarises some of these debates in her article.⁴ The first chapter of *Keeping Faith* revisits this history, drawing together some useful material, albeit mostly from the more obvious sources, while supplementing this with interviews with some of the leading protagonists in the debates of the 1970s – 'the main intellectual and political founders of the channel' (p 3), including William Whitelaw, the Conservative Home Secretary whose political clout, Docherty et al suggest, was crucial in enabling quite such a liberal broadcasting institution to be established under the Thatcher Government.

One of the most crucial aspects of Channel Four's operations is the role of the Commissioning Editors. There have, in the past, been one or two articles in this journal which have touched on the topic.⁵ There is also an autobiographical book, *One in Four: A Year in the Life of a Channel 4 Commissioning Editor*, by Michael Kustow, Commissioning Editor for the Arts at Channel Four since 1982.⁶ It is for the main part a diary of Kustow's activities between late 1985 and early 1987. Again, this is not in-depth analysis of the channel, but it does offer some useful insights into the way in which arts programmes at least appear there in the form that they do. Being autobiographical, the book is very much a collage of material and perspectives (the flippant, the self-consciously writerly, the considered intellectual, etc) on both personal and professional matters. The book is perhaps most revealing in the way it offers an implicit and at times explicit commentary on how the arts and cultural activity in general – including television-watching – are viewed at Channel Four, at least in Kustow's department and indeed in the Chief Executive's office, from the evidence of a close personal friendship between Kustow and Jeremy Isaacs, the first Chief Executive at Channel Four. It is, in many respects, a conservative, elitist and modernist approach to cultural practice. Kustow reveals a certain anxiety about the loss of specificity and uniqueness of the art object within the world of television:

³ See also: Eight Programme Makers, 'Channel 4 – One Year On', *Screen* March-April 1984, vol 25, no 2, pp 4-25; John Ellis, 'Broadcasting and the State: Britain and the Experience of Channel 4', *Screen* May-August 1986, vol 27 no 3-4 pp 6-22; John Ellis, 'Channel 4 – Working Notes', *Screen* November-December 1983, vol 24, no 6 pp 37-51; and Sylvia Harvey, 'De-regulation, Innovation and Channel Four Television', elsewhere in this issue.

⁴ Simon Blanchard, 'Where Do New Channels Come From?', in Simon Blanchard and Dave Morley (eds), *What's This Channel Four?*, London, Comedia, 1982; Stephen Lambert, *Channel 4 – Television With a Difference*, London, British Film Institute, 1982; the quotation is from p 1; and Sylvia Harvey, *op cit*.

⁵ See e.g., Eight Programme Makers, *op cit*.

⁶ Michael Kustow, *One in Four: A Year in the Life of a Channel 4 Commissioning Editor*, London Chatto and Windus, 1987; subsequent quotations from this book will be acknowledged by a page reference in brackets.

Alongside this unfolding expression of a familiar modernist ideology of art and cultural practice, there are numerous useful asides, like the running commentary on the making of two series with which he was closely involved as Commissioning Editor, *State of the Art*, an innovative series of documentaries about the contemporary art world⁸, and *Voices*, the chat show for intellectuals. When Kustow is not in the cutting room watching rough cuts of these, he is evidently caught up in one long round of lunches, dinners, drinks and other meetings with artists of one sort or another, most of whom seem to have been his contemporaries at Oxford University.

Other internal and external conflicts at the channel are touched on, such as references to the constant battles between Chief Executive Isaacs and the Chairperson of his Board, Edmund Dell, and between Isaacs or one or other of the Commissioning Editors and the IBA. Kustow reveals something of the relation between the employees and the Board when commenting on his own anxiety about coming to the end of his fixed-term contract as a Commissioning Editor. Frank McGettigan, then head of personnel and industrial relations, explains to Kustow:

Look Michael . . . Jeremy has said repeatedly that the whole of the commissioning group will be changed over ten years. You can't do anything about that. However it's applied, it's a very important shield between Jeremy and the Board. If the Board don't feel they have this sanction of a limited duration contract, they would interfere much more when they disagree with editorial policy. (p 65)

If this is one way in which Kustow comes to see the wielding of power at the channel, the most characteristic way in which he describes the power relations and the decision-making process is in terms of benevolent autocracy under the charismatic figure of Isaacs. Writing in Winter 1986, he notes: 'Because Jeremy is interested in the arts, there are periodic additions to my budget (as Commissioning Editor for the Arts), sometimes for things he wants and the channel could do with: it's a system of benevolent autocracy' (p 61).

By early 1987, the channel was being re-organised to respond to the imminent departure of both the Chief Executive (to run the Royal Opera House) and the Chairperson of the Board. Kustow now writes: 'I will no longer have the same direct, if sporadic, relationship with Jeremy. Channel Four's era of benevolent autocracy is ended, although in truth it's been over for at least a year, as the number of commissioning editors has grown and contact with Jeremy has decreased: the new structures simply acknowledge this' (p 221).

The second chapter of *Keeping Faith*, the BRU book on Channel Four, is a more systematic attempt to appraise the work of the Commissioning Editors, exploring, within a loosely Weberian understanding of bureaucratisation, the extent to which the channel has been able to keep

⁸ For a review of this series, see John Roberts, 'Postmodern Television and the Visual Arts', *Screen* Spring 1987, vol 28, no 2, pp 118-127.

⁹ *Report of the Committee on the Future of Broadcasting*, HMSO, 1977.

faith with its original vision, and the mandate to be innovatory, experimental and distinctive:

Had the Commissioning Editors changed their minds over the years about how to achieve breakthroughs in television? ... We were particularly interested in what we take to be the most challenging aspects of this mandate: that it serve special interests and minorities, and give a voice to those who previously had not had access to television. (p 3)

The authors of *Keeping Faith* are particularly concerned to establish the extent of the shift from the concept of access television and an Open Broadcasting Authority as envisaged by the Annan Committee⁹, to what they see as the editorial imperative embodied in the channel's constitution: 'When the fourth channel became Channel Four it closed as many doors as it opened. The OBA – and the notion of free access to television – was shelved and editorial television reaffirmed' (p 38).

They suggest that the channel and its commissioning processes are dominated by 'a deep-seated *professional* commitment to pluralism on the part of the editors' (p 41), a commitment which in part challenges its attempts, in its first few years of broadcasting at least, to produce frankly partial programming, opinionated journalism. This commitment to pluralism and thesis-led as opposed to opinionated factual programming actually tends to reaffirm balance (across the schedule) and even the ideology of impartiality ('The pluralist commitment of the editors working in actuality is tempered by the values associated with good journalism: namely, impartiality, objectivity and at its broadest, truth' p 43).

They also chart a shift from a self-conscious concern to address clearly politically-constituted minorities, to a concern to stress the concept of complementary programming in relation to the output of ITV, a much weaker interpretation of the channel's remit (but still a valid one):

[Most of the Commissioning Editors] pointed out, very forcibly in some cases, that the Broadcasting Act did not mention the word minority. Most preferred the act's terminology: tastes and interests not otherwise catered for. ... This is very different from the early expectations of the channel, when it was assumed that Channel 4 was precisely the channel for the downtrodden. It was, after all, supposed to bring us those voices that had been systematically excluded from television. Furthermore, in the wider scheme of things, it was part of a conception of democracy based on the idea that Britain was composed of interacting minorities, each with its own collective voice, linked by a channel which, nevertheless, remained a passive intermediary. If this was ever true of the channel in the beginning, then it appears to be no longer the case. (pp 56-57)

The view that we are left with after reading the first half of *Keeping Faith* is thus of Channel Four enabling an *extension* of the existing principles of public service broadcasting, rather than a *transformation* of

British television. The authors do not explicitly come out in favour of this attachment to a relatively conservative application of the principles of public service broadcasting, but implicitly this would seem to be their view. This is a book from and in defence of the populist centre. Its concerns and priorities, its own editorial line, its concept of innovation, and so on, are all very much in tune with what the authors see as the current dominant policy and practice of the channel. The book is thus designed to convince its readers of the need to protect and maintain the way in which Channel Four is currently funded and organised, to establish the channel as a natural and un-controversial feature of British broadcasting. This view is confirmed in the conclusions which the authors draw from the audience survey with which the second half of the book is concerned. They describe their brief and lay out some of their conclusions at the outset of the book:

*As part of the stock-taking associated with the Channel's fifth anniversary, Channel 4 asked the Broadcasting Research Unit to evaluate the success of the station – particularly its relationship with the public. This research began with a basic concern: there have been persistent accusations over the past five years that Channel 4 has been irresponsible in attitudes to the depiction of sex and violence, and biased toward the left in political attitudes. We set out to discover the public's views concerning these accusations. In particular, we wanted to know whether the audience demanded or tolerated a different type of television from Channel 4 than from the other three channels. Does it think that the channel has a special mandate to allow for the expression of different voices on television? Is it prepared to accept polemical television which differs substantially from traditional current affairs? Is minority television acceptable to the majority? Or does the public want Channel 4 to be **just another button**, as *The Times* put it in the week of the launch? On the basis of a national survey of public attitudes and forty-four in-depth discussion groups we can say that the answer to all of these is a qualified yes. This is essentially a study of public reaction to Channel 4, not of its reach or audience share, but of the kinds of judgments which the public-as-audience, or rather as a series of audiences, has begun to make. (p 2)*

The conclusions which the authors draw from the audience research are rather more forcefully re-stated at the end of the book:

The public wants the channel to continue in its present form, and would be deeply unhappy if, as a result of government policy, the channel became simply a pale imitation of ITV. Television, the public tells us, should continue to be adventurous and experimental; it should attempt polemical programmes while respecting the public's right to know the full story; and finally, it should be properly, but not overtly, cautious in the areas of sex and morality. (p 175)

This is not an academic text. It is not designed to advance theoretical speculation about the processes of making and watching television. On

¹⁰ See Ann Gray, 'Reading the Audience', *Screen* Summer 1987 vol 28, no 3, pp 24-35; David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London Comedia, 1987.

¹¹ David Morley, op cit; and David Buckingham, *Public Secrets: EastEnders and its Audience*, London BFI, 1987.

the contrary, it is first of all designed as a report to Channel Four itself about its audiences, the ways in which they use the channel, and the sense that they make of it and the ecology of broadcasting in which it operates. But it would seem also to be designed in such a way as to have some impact upon current political debate about the future of broadcasting in Britain, and in particular the future funding, organisation and programming policy of Channel Four. As such, the book is not at all self-conscious about the research methodology employed in the analysis of 'public reaction' to the channel. Given the current debate in television studies about how to conduct research into audience use of television, this is unfortunate, to say the least.¹⁰ *Keeping Faith* presents its findings in a primarily quantitative manner, with the details gleaned from a sample survey of 974 people and fixed-choice questionnaires ('Which do you think is the most important thing for television to do: to inform, to entertain or to educate? – Inform/Entertain/Educate/Can't pick one' (p 78). This is supplemented by a more qualitative and speculative type of information in the form of reports on selected conversations from discussion groups organised by the interviewers. The survey attempts to construct a cross section of 'the public', with some discussion groups being comprised of specific ethnic minorities, and gay men and lesbians, others being regionally and/or class specific, some being made up of limited users of the channel, and others of heavy Channel Four users. But as will already be evident, there is the overriding conception of 'the public' ('Out of these various components we gained a strong sense of what the British public regarded as the legitimate expression of public debate.' (p 82), a term constantly wielded to maximise the potential political impact and generalise the findings of the limited survey. A further problem is that the discussion groups are artificially constructed in that they take place outside the familiar space in which television is watched, and bring together people who did not previously know each other to talk about watching television. This is rather different to, say, the research of David Morley and David Buckingham, where in the former case, viewers are interviewed in their own homes as members of a family unit, and in the latter case, school friends are interviewed in their peer group setting.¹¹

At each turn, *Keeping Faith* seems caught between the familiar forms of quantitative audience research and the more innovative methodology of the in-depth unstructured interview pioneered in this field by researchers such as Morley. *Keeping Faith* thus operates with both this unwieldy and monolithic concept of 'the public' and a more sophisticated understanding of the different audiences, plural, that use television in distinctive ways. Perhaps in part to make an impression on both professional broadcasters and politicians, the more quantitative modes of audience research, with their connotations of scientificity and truth and their tendency towards generalisation rather than tentativeness, are employed. But this is not entirely compatible with either the statutory remit on Channel Four to address audiences not otherwise

catered for by ITV, or with the channel's own understanding to its audiences. The authors clearly recognise the need for such a conception of the audience:

From the standpoint of the ambition which lay behind the creation of the channel, any judgment of success or failure would finally have to rest on the kinds of people who made up (the audience for the channel) and the character of their response to the programmes they were watching. Isaacs commented: A lot of sterile debate hangs on the opposition between the audience or no audience. People are much choosier now. You have to stop thinking about the viewers as an undifferentiated mass or as a series of nuclear families. (p 19)

Again in their favour, the authors of *Keeping Faith* note that some of the other dominant conceptions of the television audience need to be re-thought:

The quality of the audience's arguments [as reported in the book] should disabuse ideologues of Right and Left of their elitist beliefs about the passivity of the public. Indeed, above all, this research shows that there is a very considerable desire on the part of the population to be treated as active contributors to the process of regulating television; and, in particular, to be regarded as adults, capable of making rational choices for both themselves and their children. (p 75)

They argue that; 'the viewers of television are actively participating in the creation of the meaning of a television programme. This simple but vital fact is often ignored by the censorship lobby as well as increasingly by many in television' (p 171). Even so, there remains a paradox at the heart of how *Keeping Faith* conceptualises the audience – and a sad resistance to placing it in the context of other research about watching television, and the theoretical debates currently taking place about how to conduct such work. Too often, the gist of the research seems to be determined within an agenda already set by the right, in terms of the 'effects' of 'sex'n' violence' on television, and the consensual opinion of the 'general public'.

Bearing in mind such reservations about the ways in which the research was conducted, and its findings presented, it is worth noting in a little more detail some of the conclusions reached by the authors of *Keeping Faith*. They suggest that the majority of viewers are committed to the idea of television being a public service, so that even if they never watch minority programmes themselves, they see it as right and proper that such programmes should be available for those who do want to watch them. The suggestion is also that today's tele-literate audiences want to see television acknowledge the complexity of the world and of ideas, issues and debates. As such, neither balance and impartiality, nor 'opinionated programming' should be developed at the cost of losing this articulation of complexity.

¹² Channel 4 Television Co Ltd, *Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31st March 1988*, p 14.

The authors of *Keeping Faith* suggest that there are four types of viewer as far as Channel Four is concerned: those who like the channel because it is different from the rest of television; those who dislike it because it's different; those who like it because they see it as the same as the rest of British television (it extends the alternatives within existing television genres, for instance); and those who dislike Channel Four for the same reason (i.e. because it simply extends existing genres rather than transforming television through a more wholehearted commitment to experimental, controversial or minority interest programmes which would not otherwise be shown, see pp 83-4). The most critical audience grouping which emerges is that of ethnic minorities, especially Afro-Caribbeans and Asians, who are unable to perceive any focus to its ethnic programming policy, and call for more-peak-time scheduling of programmes with positive representations of their communities, in the realm of popular genres as much as so-called factual programming: 'The channel's ethnic policy has clearly yet to satiate those for whom it is developed,' (p 121). Programmes which raise issues related to gay and lesbian culture, on the other hand, are, worryingly, constructed in this research as the ones most likely to test severely the tolerance of most audiences for Channel Four's policy. Summing up, the authors of *Keeping Faith* write that:

in general, people are reasonably tolerant of minority television as long as it does not impinge on their viewing time. There is little evidence that black, Asian or gay programming has broken out of the ghetto and changed anyone's mind on a subject. Furthermore, most people talk of minority broadcasting in ghetto terms; they are happy with its existence but have no desire to watch it. (p 142)

This rather negative view of how 'mainstream audiences' regard an important aspect of Channel Four's work is characteristic of a paradox right at the heart of the channel's constitution. Channel Four has a statutory duty to provide programmes catering for tastes and interests not otherwise catered for on ITV; that is to say, it has a duty to work in a way that is potentially outside the institutionalised discourses of British television. But at the same time, it must not offend public taste, and is required to adhere to the ideologies of balance and impartiality. As the authors of *Keeping Faith* point out, 'the more [Channel Four] fulfils its mandate the more it will enrage particular individuals and constituents and the more its mandate is potentially called into question' (p 4).

It's an issue that the channel is well aware of. As the Channel Four Report for 1987-88 notes, 'the channel has tried to avoid blandness: much of its programming will please some viewers very much at the expense of repelling others'.¹² What is interesting about this comment is the context in which it operates. The sentence appears in a section of the Report entitled 'Audience: "Television to Talk About"', which argues that what is distinctive about Channel Four programming is not

how many people watch the channel, but how they watch its programmes, how they use them. While it is possible to see what the writers of the Report (and the advertising campaign which used the same slogan) are getting at, it also involves a rather too familiar perspective on popular or commercial programming as being something which somehow *kills* conversation and social intercourse, when, as various writers have argued, popular television can actually be seen as a *focus* for conversation.¹³ Even so, the idea of deliberately setting out to create controversial television to provoke public (and private) debate can be seen as a fruitful practice. But it doesn't resolve the paradox that faces Channel Four, wherein to carry out successfully the statutory duty to address new audiences and interests is, implicitly at least, to challenge the consensus opinion that is generally mobilised in definitions of 'the public taste', and the middle ground of balanced and impartial television.

There is a second paradox facing Channel Four which is that, on the one hand, it has a duty to be innovatory and experimental in form and content, which in effect also involves seeking new audiences, new ways of addressing audiences, and new ways of audiences using TV programmes; but, on the other hand, the channel is funded (indirectly) through advertising, which means that there is a certain obligation to maximise audiences, which implies developing relatively conservative or conventional modes of address and scheduling. In effect, if the channel's funding structure makes its cultural policy possible, since it is not forced to compete in an open market with the other channels, it also makes its cultural policy *impossible*, since it does still have to compete for audiences, albeit a regulated environment. In part, even in commercial terms, Channel Four is still able to address minority audiences, given the development in the advertising world of targeting specific audiences, rather than trying always to reach the largest possible number of viewers. But this only makes sense to the advertising industry in relation to relatively young, high-earning consumers/audiences, so in part, in order to resolve this paradox, the channel is required to operate with the twin terms of diversity and balance, or the ideology of liberal pluralism, in mind.

But to invoke the concept of balance is also to invoke all the other cultural baggage of the professional ideology of the public service broadcaster. In a political climate which fosters a profound concern about audience ratings, there is an almost inevitable tendency to minimise controversy and difference, innovation and experimentation, by falling back on conventions of 'good television'. Professionalism and innovation do not necessarily go hand in hand: professionalism is never neutral, but involves a *conventional* way of operating; innovation means stretching or breaking those conventions. And there is a history of programmes disappearing from the Channel Four schedules on the grounds that they are *un-professionally* made, or not of a good enough standard. Thus, soon after taking up office as the new Chief Executive, Michael Grade was reported as saying that some series on Channel Four

¹³ See David Morley, *op cit*, pp 18-22 and *passim*; and Jane Root, *Open The Box*, London, Comedia, 1986.

¹⁴ Quoted in Mark Lawson, 'What makes the Grade?', *Marxism Today*, February 1988, p 33.

¹⁵ See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, p 97.

¹⁶ *Television and Radio 1988: IBA Yearbook of Independent Broadcasting*, IBA, 1988, p 11.

¹⁷ David Docherty et al, *Keeping Faith*, op cit, p 62; idib, p 58; Michael Kustow, op cit, p 99.

'are of a technical standard not tolerated elsewhere'.¹⁴ But how can the channel keep to its mandate if it cannot also innovate in the arena of 'standards'? For is not a successful innovation one which, precisely, becomes standardised?¹⁵

It is in this context, and for these reasons, that what are most urgently needed in the debate about Channel Four are detailed analyses of the sorts of programmes which Sylvia Harvey cites in this issue as being potentially innovatory in one way or another – perhaps with the addition of some of the more popular programmes from light entertainment and drama. (For many people, it is *Brookside* which is the Channel Four flagship, and not *Right to Reply* or *Channel Four News*.) At present, too many assumptions are made about the relative innovations of one or other programmes – and we actually get little further than the pronouncements of the Channel Four staff who commission and facilitate the programmes, as regularly wheeled out in the annual Channel Four Report, or the IBA Yearbook, and in various other more occasional forums. It is regularly asserted that *Channel Four News* is innovatory because of its longer format, and because of the intentions of the producers and commissioners to extend the categories of newsworthiness. In the 1988 IBA Yearbook, for instance, Jeremy Isaacs described his news programme as 'a longer, more serious news'.¹⁶ But I am not aware of any studies which have analysed the extent to which this claim holds water. The agenda must, in other words, be retrieved from Channel Four and its apologists, be re-examined, and, if necessary, re-drawn. It should then be possible to assess the extent to which Channel Four has been able to transform the nature and practice of public service broadcasting. As Harvey suggests, one of the main areas of potential innovation on Channel Four has to do with the *extension* of generic and discursive boundaries. But only detailed analysis of programmes which appear to fall into this category and of audience use of such programmes can really show whether such extensions have had a dramatic effect on the production of meaning and pleasure. Certainly, there are grounds for worry about the editorial function of the channel remaining paternalist and Reithian, given statements such as the following from three of the channel's Commissioning Editors:

People don't know what they are interested in until you tell them that they are interested. (Adrian Metcalf, Commissioning Editor for Sport)

By and large, what television should do – and that is why you require an editorial mind to do it – is to make a very humble judgment of what the country needs and do that. (Farrukh Dhondy, Commissioning Editor for Multi-Culture Programmes)

People don't know that they have a need for the arts until they start to taste them and acquire the appetite. (Michael Kustow, Commissioning Editor for Arts Programmes)¹⁷

So what of the future? How will Channel Four survive in a differently regulated environment? Already there seems to be a shift in some of the key terms mobilised in the political debate about the channel, from a positive definition of innovation in terms of 'serving minority interests', to a much more negative one in terms of the channel simply 'complementing' ITV¹⁸. The idea of complementarity has been written into the statutes since the channel's inception, but it now seems to have a much more prominent position in public debate. But is this necessarily a problem? It does rather depend upon one's view of the merits and limits of public service broadcasting, whether it's the Channel Four version or otherwise. Could it be that it is ITV, and commercial broadcasting in general, that is really the innovatory partner – with the logic of the market-place opening the way to less paternalist and more populist structures of feeling?¹⁹

¹⁸ See, for instance, Alan Peacock, *Report of the Committee on Financing the BBC*, HMSO, 1986, p 144: 'We would, however, still wish to see Channel 4 offering complementary services.'

¹⁹ For an interesting argument along these lines, see Ian Connell and Lidia Curti, 'Popular broadcasting in Italy and Britain', in Phillip Drummond and Richard Paterson (eds), *Television in transition*, London BFI, 1986.

THE REAGAN RECORD

DOUGLAS GOMERY ON DEREGULATION IN THE UNITED STATES

¹ For a summary of what the FCC likes to think it has accomplished, see Jay Sharbutt, 'FCC's Patrick Boosts Deregulation's Effects', *Los Angeles Times*, Section VI, September 23, 1988, p 24.

RONALD REAGAN CAME IN as president in 1981, and as promised instituted a major shift in policy toward television and film. His administration, favouring a perfectly competitive brand of economic efficiency over all other criteria, pressed to free businesses of all types to produce and distribute their wares, free of the constraints of federal regulation. This, Reagan and his advisors argued, would offer the United States economy the proper path to economic growth, prosperity for corporations, and great choice for the consumer.

In particular for television and film industries they argued that regulations ought only to be kept if the market-place could not handle the problem. Reagan appointed Mark Fowler as Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, the regulatory body for television. Fowler saw almost no need for rules covering behaviour of television stations, save for issuing licences. This was only necessary to prevent station overlap and interference. This policy has become known as deregulation. (Fowler's hand-picked successor, Dennis Patrick, has continued Fowler's initiatives and, some argue, has taken an even broader view of possible deregulation.)

The Reagan administration now argues that the media business has prospered under deregulation. Supporters posit that deregulation has not only boosted the television business, but economic activity for the advertising community, and programme producers, principally the Hollywood companies. They point out that even the public has it better with more choice from cable television, pay-television, and home video.

The Fowler and Patrick FCCs, over the past eight years, have dropped the Fairness Doctrine (promoting balanced reporting), ended the requirement that television stations be held for a minimum of three years (intended to minimise speculation in television stations), and eased restrictions on the number of television stations any one party can own. At the end of 1988 the FCC, before the Bush appointees have taken charge, is working to eliminate restrictions preventing broadcasting operations from owning cable television channels and franchises (local systems).¹

In short, Fowler and Patrick's FCCs have granted the corporate world free reign over the production, distribution and presentation of pro-

grammes. Today television operators can show almost anything they want. Indeed that is what deregulation principally accomplished, placing the control of programming completely in the business, profit-seeking world. They stated, over and over again, that television ought to be as free as the press, the newspaper industry. They pointed out that the motion picture industry, since the Miracle case in 1952, has been guaranteed such rights.²

Deregulation has had important effects in the world of television in the United States. Indeed Fowler and Patrick have accomplished what they set out to do. But what arguments on both sides miss is that far more important for television and film in the long-run has been the loosening of antitrust policy, accomplished by the US Department of Justice, particularly under Attorney General Edwin Meese. The massive loosening of antitrust restrictions has been directly felt in the motion picture industry (which used to have specific antitrust restrictions on theatre ownership), but also in the ownership and operation of television stations and networks. In the long run, the loosening of antitrust will have a greater lasting legacy from Reagan's presidency than the far more heralded deregulation activities.

² See a fine summary of these activities in 'Focus on the Fairness Doctrine', a series of articles in *Variety*, November 30, 1988, pp 69-70, 72.

³ For more on the Murdoch purchase, see my previous report, 'Vertical Integration, Horizontal Regulation: The Growth of Rupert Murdoch's US media Empire', *Screen*, May-August 1986, vol 27 no 3-4, pp 78-86.

The Level Playing Field

The Fowler FCC set the stage for the effectiveness of the loosening of antitrust restrictions. Since 1986 television stations can be purchased by almost anyone, with almost no hassle. Consider Rupert Murdoch's purchase of the former Metromedia television stations. Murdoch certainly had the necessary financing; what he lacked was US citizenship. In the past, administrations would simply not have permitted a 'foreigner' to purchase such an important US television property. The Fowler FCC delayed, permitting Murdoch to become a citizen and then take over his stations.³

Generally the television industry was permitted to function without constraints. Profit maximisation became the sole criterion. Those who made the most money should be praised; those who lost money were told to try another business. The long-held policy of seeking to promote the 'public convenience, interest and necessity' (found in the 1934 United States Communications Law) was fostered by letting profit determine what was best for the public, its interests and desires.

The FCC recognised that there was a problem of too much network power. But the solution of what to do about NBC, ABC and CBS was to promote alternative television technologies, cable television in particular. Indeed the FCC purposely advanced the interests of cable television. This was a direct application of the economic theory of countervailing power: make cable as big as network television and the 'network problem' would go away.

But what we got were simply more dominant media empires. Con-

⁴ Indeed, in *Channels* magazine's end-of-the-year special issue at the close of 1987 calculating the top 40 biggest media companies in the US by revenues, Time Inc ranked fourth after the three networks companies (General Electric, Capital Cities and CBS), and just ahead of TCI. See *Channels*, 1988 Field Guide, pp 60-61.

⁵ Do not confuse United Artists Communication, a movie theatre company which grew out of United Artists Theatres, with the second half of MGM/UA, the movie producer. They are two separate corporations.

⁶ Laura Landro, 'Telecommunications' Moves Are Pondered By Analysts, Who Wonder About a Buy-Out', *The Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 1988, p 49.

sider the case of Time Inc.⁴ In 1987 Time Inc took in a billion and a half dollars from television/video-related activities. It owns Home Box Office (HBO) and Cinemax, two of the top five pay television channels, as well as a share of Ted Turner's Broadcasting Service and the Black Entertainment cable television channel. Although HBO remains a small player by Hollywood standards (never fulfilling the promise of becoming the major studio some predicted in the early 1980s), the basis of Time's power lies with ATC (American Television and Communication), Time's vast (nearly four million subscribers) franchise of cable systems around the US. ATC controls a legal monopoly in each municipality from coast to coast – that is, in its franchise territory (defined by local law), ATC has the sole right to deliver cable services into those households.

Telecommunications Inc (or TCI to insiders) does even better than Time Inc. This company is not only the most powerful cable franchiser (with nearly five million subscribers), but also the nation's largest owner of movie theatres with United Artists Communications.⁵ TCI, in terms of cable and related video revenues, is as large as Time Inc, and ahead of Murdoch's News Inc. The difference is that TCI is purely a cable television company. From its local monopolies, TCI may reach less than twenty per cent of all possible subscribers, but these are well placed, suburban households, highly valued by pay and basic cable companies and advertisers.⁶

To make sure that its customers never lack for programming, TCI has in recent years taken major stakes in five important cable services:

- 1) a sixth of Black Entertainment Network, the sole cable channel aimed at the US's largest minority group.
- 2) a sixth of the Discovery Channel, a cable channel which re-cycles foreign documentaries to US cable viewers. This is the fastest-growing cable network in recent years, and is popular with viewers with high incomes who are most valued by advertisers.
- 3) a tenth of the Cable Value Channel, a shopping channel which hawks products directly to viewers through a phone-in/credit card service. Shopping channels have converted television from part-advertising, part-programming to day-long advertising.
- 4) half of American Movie Classics which plays older films to film buffs around the clock. On this side of the fence TCI's subsidiary takes a strong leadership role *against* colourisation.
- 5) an eighth of Turner Broadcasting Service which includes Turner's SuperStation, America's most widely-seen basic cable service together with Cable News Network (CNN). Much of what Turner shows on his SuperStation and his new network TNT, which began in October 1988, are older films, more and more in colourised versions. On this side of the fence TCI sponsors the greatest number of colourised screenings of cable television sets in the US.

Time Inc and TCI certainly do not represent the only new cable television operations in the US. But they do show how the FCC has encour-

aged more concentration of ownership, not less, in the name of 'fighting' NBC, ABC, and CBS. The proposed 'level playing field' promised by deregulation has never been level, and with new giants like TCI and Time Inc is becoming less level every day. US television (and its Hollywood programming suppliers), created by a policy of deregulation, offers a world of unlimited vertical control where more often than not the local presentation mode (a theatre, a television station, a cable service) is owned and programmed by a giant corporation which also has a stake in the distribution of the shows and their actual creation. Ponder how an HBO-financed film is distributed by HBO to an ATC customer, with all the monies flowing to parent Time Inc.

New Antitrust Fundamentals

But even more significant changes in concentration of ownership and control have been fostered by Reagan's Department of Justice. That agency's lack of enforcement of long-held antitrust policies has led to mergers and acquisitions in record numbers. Hollywood corporations have been purchasing theatre circuit after theatre circuit. Universal now dominates the Cineplex Odeon chain, which operates houses from Toronto to Los Angeles, Chicago to Washington, DC. Warners and Paramount are about to merge theatre operations. Columbia, now free from domination by former parent Coca-Cola, is making its Loew's circuit into a national powerhouse.

Over the past two years the Department of Justice has permitted Warner, Paramount, Columbia and Universal to buy nearly twenty per cent of the nation's movie screens. And these screens are in the top movie-going cities, the most profitable locations in New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Washington, DC. Columbia paid nearly three hundred million dollars to acquire the three hundred plus screens of the Loew's chain.⁷ Universal anted up even more than 300 million dollars for its share (50 per cent) of Cineplex-Odeon. United Artists Theatres has been sold to cable giant TCI. The restrictions are so loose that major Hollywood companies, Warner and Paramount, are even permitted to share the cost of a national chain.⁸

Make no mistake about it, the major Hollywood companies have been the big winners in this merger mania. Indeed they have diversified far beyond simply acquiring theatres. Consider that Columbia, Paramount, Warners, Universal, Disney and Twentieth Century Fox are all major players in home video sales. Warner has the stable cash flowing in from its cable operations, enabling it to take over long-time successful television producer Lorimar-Telepictures (*Dallas*, *Knots Landing*, *Falcon Crest*), scheduled to be signed by the end of 1988. Universal owns the powerful New York independent television (not affiliated with one of the three networks) station WWOR, found on many cable systems and Disney has just taken control of a similarly large independent KHJ,

⁷ Ironically, Loew's was spun off, by court decree, from parent-founder MGM during the 1950s as part of the antitrust decrees of the 1948 US Supreme Court Paramount decision.

⁸ Lisa Gubernick, 'Movie Madness', *Business Week*, February 8, 1988, pp 37-38. Note that at the end of 1988, court approval remains to be granted for the Warner-Paramount joint operation. All indications point to the court granting permission.

⁹ Merrill Brown, 'The Business Side: Hollywood Wins Again', *Channels*, September, 1988, p 34.

¹⁰ In the mid-1980s Capital Cities, an owner of stations, acquired ABC, and the Loew's Corporation, rid of its theatres but still a giant conglomerate, took over CBS.

¹¹ See Rob Stoddard, 'Cable Under Fire in DC', *Cable Television Business*, June 1, 1988, pp 18-24.

¹² *ibid*, p 21.

¹³ For a useful summary see Lisa Stein, 'The FCC Under Bush', *Cablevision*, November 21, 1988, pp 58, 60, 62.

¹⁴ As of this writing, near the end of 1988, the rumour is that attorney Susan Wing will be the new chair.

based in Los Angeles. And this does not count the Hollywood majors' stake in recorded music, selected cable channels, theme parks and television programming production, among other enterprises.⁹

Hollywood may have changed the most, but the mergers in the television industry have been equally impressive and extraordinary. Take the case of the three networks. Consider that in the mid-1980s General Electric took over NBC. That is, one of the world's largest manufacturers acquired one of the world's most important vehicles for mass advertising. When International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT), not nearly as large, tried to take over ABC in the 1960s there was a howl of protest and investigation. But with the General Electric acquisition of NBC, the FCC and the Department of Justice found no problems.¹⁰

The merger mania has become so frenetic that trade associations representing one group accuse others of being *the* only true monopoly treat. For example, we have Jack Valenti, head of the Motion Picture Association of America, challenging the cable interests in front of the United States Congress. The Hollywood movie companies want to have cable (based on its local monopolies) declared an antitrust problem and regulated monopoly.¹¹ Indeed over and over Valenti repeats his accusations in a skilful public relations campaign. Correctly he notes that once a local franchise is granted the customer has little choice: either hook up or not. Valenti put it this way earlier in 1988: 'Customers have two choices. They can either commit suicide, or they can go bowling. But they can't choose another cable system.'¹²

The Bush Difference

But the Reagan era is now over. What of the successor in George Bush?

During the presidential campaign, George Bush said little save that he would not stray far from the Reagan deregulation doctrine. His only specific stand was that he supported repeal of the fairness doctrine. But Bush's immediate goal is to establish better working relationships with the United States Congress for he lacks Reagan's clear mandate. And the United States Congress, controlled by the opposing Democratic party, has specific ideas on what changes ought to be made, and they include, at the top of the agenda, re-regulation. If Bush is to compromise with Congress, it will take him away from the strident principles of Reagan deregulation.¹³

Mark Fowler and Dennis Patrick confronted Congress. Their defiant attitudes led to precious few compromises. Influential Democratic members of Congress argued that the consumer had become the pawn in Reagan's game of helping corporations through deregulation and the loosening of antitrust policies. Thus no one expects Patrick to last as FCC Chairman through 1989, and the new chair of the FCC will have to be a person willing to seek an accommodation with a Congress controlled by the Democrats to an even greater extent than during the Reagan years.¹⁴

More generally this will mean, I think, some rollback of deregulation. Let me provide an example. Consider the Cable Act of 1984 which took all power from the hands of the municipalities which grant the franchises, and gave it to cable companies like ATC and TCI. The call has been to reregulate this unregulated monopoly. And during 1989 some form of reregulation will be seriously debated, and most likely passed. The questions today are: will George Bush sign re-regulation? Veto it as Reagan might have? Or cut a deal? The betting is on the last option.¹⁵

But what is lacking in all the Republican and Democratic struggles, the speculations about future relations between a Bush administration and a democratic Congress are proposals for a comprehensive, clear-cut policy for the changing world of communications. Although the discussions of such a policy usually centre on voice and data transmission (the old phone companies), ideas about the proper role of direct broadcasting satellites, high definition television and broad-band (versus today's narrow-band) cable systems are only beginning to be set forth. There will be any number of options offered in 1989 by the right, left and centre.

And the Reagan lack of concern with antitrust enforcement will end. As the end of 1988 drew to a close most on Wall Street believed that the impetus to 'mega-deals' in the fall of 1988 was inspired by the perception that the end of the Reagan 'hands-off' policy would not extend into the administration of George Bush. The government challenged only 0.7 per cent of the deals between 1982 and 1986 in which the parties were required to file for antitrust approval. (In contrast the four years of the presidency of Jimmy Carter saw the percentage stay at 2.5.) What will remain is a notion that 'bigness is *not* bad', because Reagan's appointment of conservative judges will be around into the twenty-first century to interpret antitrust disputes. (And make sure there will be many brought to court.¹⁶)

The Reagan Legacy

Few believe that Bush will do anything but tinker with the changes Reagan instituted. Bush appointees will operate at the margin, knowing that fundamental changes are already in place. And the long-term effects of these changes will be, and will continue to be, profound.

But that does not mean Reagan did not continue to have a direct effect over media policy, even in the waning days of his administration. Consider days before Bush was elected, Reagan – on November 5, 1988 – vetoed a bill to impose modest limits on advertising for children's television. The proposal would have put commercial restrictions on children's programmes of ten-and-a-half advertising minutes per hour on weekends, and twelve minutes per hour on weekdays. It would also have required broadcasters to serve 'special needs' of children. Even the networks backed this compromise, but conservatives pressured President Reagan to send a signal that he still wanted absolutely *no* restrictions on the marketplace.¹⁷

¹⁵ See 'Where Things Stand – Cable Regulation', *Broadcasting*, November 29, 1988, p 12; Stuart N Brotman, 'What Might Do To Cable', *Cable Television Business*, December 1, 1988, pp 56-57.

¹⁶ Stephen J Adler, 'Hands-Off Antitrust Policy Likely to End, Whoever Wins the Presidential Election', *The Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 1988, p B1.

¹⁷ Doug Holonen, 'Reagan Veto of Kids' Bill Causes Furor', *Electronic Media*, November 14, 1988, pp 3, 52.

¹⁸ See J Max Robbins, 'Here Come the News Punks', *Channels*, September 1988, pp 39-43 for more background on this recent trend in television journalism programming.

¹⁹ Paul Fehri, 'The Quiet Invasion of the Media Moguls', *The Washington Post*, November 27, 1988, pp H1, H5.

Reagan's legacy first and foremost will be a media world of more concentration of ownership. Fewer and fewer companies control more and more of the media output. So there is less news and public affairs' reporting on the three networks. There is more open appeal to shows emphasising the 'lowest common denominator', stressing sex and violence. So in the competitive world of 'news' we have a new genre, the sensational 'documentary'-style specials and series. Gerald Rivera gives us 'Murder: Live From Death Row', the Fox Broadcasting network scores big audience ratings with 'America's Most Wanted', and normally-sedate NBC, backed by profit-conscious General Electric, has presented 'Unsolved Mysteries'. Balanced, in-depth journalism is out in favour of the exposé, the bizarre. For the latter, as has been proven in the tabloid newspapers for decades, makes more money.¹⁸

The concentrated world of the cable television business is no different. We seem to have more choice, more diversity, but the choices are the same. That is, the number of television genres has expanded only slightly. Cable is best characterised as a showcase for re-runs, repeats of past programming such as 'Leave It to Beaver', 'The Brady Bunch', and 'Gilligan's Island' which are sent into homes by cable hour after hour, day after day. To 'compete', a small number of public television stations around the US have turned to re-runs, offering old Disney shows or repeats of Lawrence Welk.

Advertising (which generates the money for over-the-air and cable stations alike) has become blurred with programming. Robert Vaughn's special entitled 'Discover' seems to be a news show, but is in fact a half-hour-long advertisement for a hair-replacement technique. Financial News Network runs business shows which look like reports from Wall Street but instead are simply half-hour-long advertisements for financial services. Toy manufacturers run half-hour Saturday morning animation programmes for children, promoting their toys in the advertisements and programming alike.

Few doubt that as we approach the twenty-first century a handful of giant *worldwide* media conglomerates will dominate film and television throughout the world. Rupert Murdoch has led the way. He understands that a book can be published by his Harper and Row subsidiary, be serialised in his numerous magazines or newspapers, produced as a mini series or movie by his Twentieth Century Fox studio, shown on his Fox television network, all promoted by his movie/television magazines, *Premiere* and *TV Guide*. The West German Bretlsmann has become the world's largest media company in terms of revenues, of six-and-a-half billion dollars from dozens of publishing operations. Hachette, the Paris-based magazine publisher, with revenues estimated at about four billion dollars per year, owns seventy-four magazines in ten languages. Of course, Hollywood companies have led the way, showing the world how to fully exploit a global market, first in films and then in television series.¹⁹

Only one economic event can change these predictions. And it will

come, we just do not know when. Some time in the next decade a major economic downturn will take place. Then highly-leveraged media empires will strain to meet their debts, and one or more may go under. The depth and length of the recession will affect the media world to a degree we can only understand by examining the media world of the 1930s. Until then we should expect the giant corporations which control the media world, in the US and around the world, to remain firmly in control. This will be Ronald Reagan's greatest legacy, far more important than his years as an actor and union activist.

HEGEMONY AND ORGASM -OR THE INSTABILITY OF HETEROSEXUAL PORNOGRAPHY

BY CINDY PATTON

¹ Carol Clover's 'Her Body/Himself' in *Representations*, Fall, 1986, is an excellent example of a participant-observer approach to spectatorship analysis in combination with textual reading of a huge number of slasher films.

IN THE UNITED STATES home video has provided a rich and diverse market for pornography aimed at and semiotically coded for specific audiences. Although film titles and the photos on box covers clearly suggest the gender and sexual orientation of the presumed viewer – male/female, gay/straight – the videos themselves blur homo and hetero-eroticism and go to great lengths to distinguish the codes directed at the male versus female viewer. This new market has spawned a range of sub-genres, one of which is cine-realist and marketed to heterosexual couples. The producers of these videos have tried to create a pornography that can be viewed jointly by heterosexual men and women. However, available cinematic strategies for constructing a female and a male sexual narrative make heterosexuality unstable, if not impossible in such videos. This particular set of videos problematises three areas of film and sexuality theory: the female spectator, the cinematic construction of sexual pleasure, and the cultural status of orgasm.

The Female Viewer and the Spectre of 'The Feminine'

There has been considerable debate about the possibility of theorising a female spectator.

Since film theory is heavily reliant on psychoanalysis, it has generally been argued that the subject of the gaze is male, the object female. In addition, the female figure works cinematically as a gendered character in the story, as a narrative vehicle of the Oedipal meta-narrative, and as a code for 'the feminine'. It is unclear, then, what a female position of looking at film might mean, where that position might be. More recently it has been suggested that women cinema-goers are not totally elided in film watching, but must perform a gymnastic or perhaps an act of transvestism in order to find their position as spectator. It is clear that cinema-goers can, do, and may even be constituted¹ through identifications across gender. *How* this works is still an open question.

It was never the intention of these theorists to say that women couldn't identify with film characters, only that the mode of cinematic address seemed to equate looking with the male position. Much of this theory evolved at a time when there was little concern about finding methods for analysing what/how audiences watched movies. The first generation of spectator theory generally assessed preferred readings and suggested how male and female viewers were situated relative to these readings. But while there may have been legitimate theoretical or methodological reasons for disregarding actual viewers, the tendency to essentialise the male and the female viewer, even while examining the construction of masculinity and femininity in cinematic relations, stretched these analyses to their limit. Analysing pornography aimed at male viewers (as most porn was until the late 1970s or early 1980s, a few path-blazers in the 1960s and 1970s notwithstanding) was entirely consistent with this approach: film theorists were apparently unaware of what male porn-goers actually did in hard-core XXX cinemas. It was probably not until gay liberation made possible (quixotically) 'all-male revues' that it emerged that many of the heterosexual male viewers of heterosexual porn were in fact engaging in a range of questionably homosexual acts at the same time – from jerking off in front of other men to allowing themselves to be fucked by or receiving hand jobs from other men, who were perhaps also heterosexually-identified males.

The appearance of porn targeted at specific, orientation-defined audiences forced the combat zone-goer to choose between the cinema showing the straight film and the cinema showing the gay film. (As opposed to choosing to see a straight or gay film. A friend of mine tells the story of having sex with a 'straight' man periodically over the course of a decade. The man would be fucked by my friend. When my friend could not see the screen in the peep show booth, the man would watch gay porn. When my friend could see the screen, the man would switch to a straight video. Thus, even though he was a man being fucked by an openly gay man, he maintained – for several years – the pretence that he was 'straight' by pretending to watch straight videos.) The split between the motivations, actions and logics of audiences in these theatres problematises, to say the least, notions of sexual identity and practice, and the role and meaning of representations of heterosexual sex.

Employing psychoanalytic notions of sublimated homosexuality, even without knowledge of the actual practices of porno cinema-goers, made it unproblematic that this 'masculine' looking position might be directed toward a male object. Homosexual or homosocial power relations are not shocking topics for psychoanalytic or film theorists. But the question of female viewers did arise: when female viewers looked at object women from this male position, were they really engaging in transvestite heterosexuality? Did this mean that female viewers, cast into the male position of looking at males also had a homosexual gaze? The theories of looking always presumed structural heterosexuality after the gender calculus was complete.

Challenging this heterosexual presumption created a problem for feminist claims of patriarchal hegemony: if women could be postulated as spectators in a non-male position then women might have access to the power of looking. Did this mean women, looking as women, could objectify each other? Clearly, Andrea Dworkin thinks so: the Dworkin/MacKinnon anti-porn ordinance suggests that it makes no difference if a woman is inserted into the looking position, or if a man is put into the object position. It is the subject/object relation itself that is the problem.

But this begins to tax the calculus of a stable structural heterosexuality. It denies that there might be a female desire independent of male reference, that is, a *conceptually lesbian desire*, which moves independently in sexual narratives. The reluctance to entertain lesbian desire comes not from a fear of female homosexuality, but rather from a fear of constructing autonomous female pleasure. Challenging this elision in feminist spectator and narrative theory has serious implications for feminist analyses and political practices premised on the idea of the primacy of women's experience of victimisation.

While gay and feminist theorists have pondered the questions of looking, power relations and gender, the mass market pornographers have been trying to make videos that will appeal to heterosexual viewing couples. They need to appeal to a female viewer in a post-feminist era, and appeal to male viewers who are not familiar with, or are even offended by the old, seedy, subcultural pornography. Do current, gendered cinematic codes permit the representation of women for women and in front of men? And can the neurotic fantasies that structured classic male porn be reworked to be shown in front of women so as not to embarrass men? In short, is it possible to represent heterosexuality within a single frame?

The Status of Porn

I want to contextualise the particular film to be discussed, and in the process, I shall say something about my own theory of pornography and sexual narratives. These new videos are radically different in visual style and consumption patterns from the pornography of X-rated cinemas and peep shows, the more publicly-consumed pornography which has been the subject of much feminist analysis and activism. There are many surface similarities between this new pornography, available at virtually any video rental store in the US, and the classic pornography made for consumption in male-only, highly organised subcultural zones. In many respects, women are presented as having more social power and sexual agency in the new porn videos. However, the videos rely heavily on Hollywood romantic narrative conventions, often literally ripping off plots from well-known recent Hollywood films. Unlike the aesthetically cruder, unmotivated 'fuck films' of the peep show or XXX cinema, these new videos are seamless, ciné-realist narratives.

Precursors to this ciné-realist style are the Emanuelle films and some European imports, like *I am Curious Yellow* (directed by Vilgot Sjöman, 1967). The former were soft core porn – though strong on autonomous female desire. The late 1960s and early 1970s porn/art films are much closer to other avant-garde film at the time, for example, *Venus in Furs* (directed by Jess Franco, 1970) is very ‘druggy’ and, for all its weird violence, soft core and only ‘R’-rateable today. The new, couple-oriented home video is essentially without precedent in its attempt to attract a male and female audience who do not identify as sexually fringe or kinky and in being hard core and non-violent. The movies are, in one sense, low-budget ciné-realist films with penises, anuses, vaginas, and clitorises shot unabashedly, but not ‘artistically’ or with any hint of kinkiness. The sex is virtually all portrayed as being within a range of ‘normal’ drives and desires. But the more aesthetic new porn does not represent a softening of pornographic representation, rather, it represents a merging of the sexually explicit with the romantically compelling.

I will resist offering a definition of pornography because it seems premature to suggest that pornography is a thing-in-itself, bounded by the *cordon sanitaire* of good taste, political or theoretical correctness. For now, I am content to look archaeologically at resemblances between particular pornographies and contemporaneous representations of the sexual body. I reject the notion that pornography can be meaningfully analysed as a pan-historic, cross-cultural representation of patriarchal fantasies or a pornographic imagination. I also reject the idea of a transcendent erotic that is mediated or, as radical feminists would argue, systematically distorted through representation. If there are similarities between the social construction of the erotic and the circulating representations of sexuality in various historical periods, I do not think we can currently make the case for any sort of direct historical or developmental line between them. Perhaps each historic formation has its own ways of relating something called ‘the erotic’ with real bodies and social representations of sexuality, but the relationships between these elements across time are at best transversal and not transformational. Despite apparent surface similarities between, say, *Venus in Furs*, *Justine*, *The Story of O*, and any of the videos one can pick up at the local store, each is related more to the particular historical, political and economic structure of sex, representation, and the *techné* of the body than any is to the other. And, I will argue, contemporary home video porn for couples is more similar to the ordinary, mainstream films, and the politics therein, than to *Hustler* or *Penthouse* and their own spinoff porno-video products.

Thus, it is important to understand that the pornography that we have criticised and politicised in recent feminist debates only achieved the legal, production and social possibilities of a mass market after the Second World War. Physique magazines, *Playboy*, the early gay liberation periodicals, Master’s and Johnson’s sexual functionalism, the chal-

lenging of medical definitions of homosexuality, the perception that women had sexual desires and agency all emerged as a complex of representations of or discourses about the sexual body. It seems problematic to theorise pornography as an extreme artifact of the sexual discourse of this period: why privilege pornography? The specific images that emerged as pornography are more determined by legal factors and market constraints than they are easily distinguishable from other, similar representations. This is still true – the so-called violent pornography blurs with both horror films and advertising pictures and, likewise, the new home video pornography looks strikingly similar to the romantic narratives in mainstream films. The visually arresting and sexually perverse New American Gothic may be the cinematic form which most problematises the relationship between sexuality, violence, and romance. This set of films – beginning perhaps with the Bob Rafelson remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), with Jack Nicholson and Jessica Lange and *Atlantic City* (directed by Louis Malle, 1980) – which are settling into a new genre are of unstable social and sexual politics. Their critical reception has ranged from charges of sexism and sexual repressionism to praise for their challenge to ciné-realist essentialism and their accommodation of the current crisis in gender and heterosexuality.

There has been excellent work by Richard Dyer, Michael Bronski, John D'Emilio, and others on the emergence and essentialisation of sexual representations after the war, and there is no need to recount this here. However, it is critical to recognise that the relationship between print pornography and cine porn is complex, and has become more problematic with the rise of home video porn consumption. Feminist analysis has tended to consider these only mild variations on a patriarchal theme, but the viewer-text relations and the unique features of cinematic codes suggest that magazines and videos inscribe gender, power and looking quite differently.

Orgasm and Cinematic Orgasm

Male sexual fulfilment, in Western culture, is synonymous with orgasm. The discourse of male orgasm is generally limited to how to achieve one. There is no question that men have orgasms: the proof is ejaculation. Male orgasm is taken as accomplished or not, an essential and essentialist punctuation of the sexual narrative. No orgasm, no sexual pleasure. No come shot, no narrative closure. Women need not be represented in the male sexual narrative, which can be completely masturbatory, can be male directed, but is ultimately resolved through the convention of the self-referential come shot of cinematic pornography.

This conventional depiction of male orgasm is the penis shot full-frame, spewing semen. As the cost of production has decreased, these orgasms are shot in slow motion, though it appears that slow motion

orgasms and several other cinematic techniques peculiar to pornography originated in gay porn and were picked up by straight porn. At least in the 1970s, gay porn preceded straight porn in depicting sex as positive. The nexus of illicit and explicit sex that characterised 'combat zone' pornography in the 1960s and early 1970s (as opposed to 'art' cinema porn) was challenged by the early 'fuck films' of gay porn makers, films which had strong symbolic references to the gay positive liberation culture of the 1970s, and which depicted a range of male types generally engaging in fairly 'democratic' sex – i.e. a strong value in much of the not very commercial early gay porn was the reciprocity of fucking between the characters. In the 1980s, a serial interest is maintained in some gay production houses through having actors who never 'get fucked', or who are 'fucked for the first time' by an even more 'top' actor.

Point of view in pornography is notoriously incoherent: we are sometimes voyeurs watching the action and sometimes in the eyeline of the male subject. But by the time of the come shot, the viewer is tightly positioned as the person who owns the penis. Even though not everyone in this culture has a penis, the cinematic conventions which position the viewer as the person coming are fairly seamless, and it is quite easy to imagine that this is your penis, regardless of your anatomical configuration.

Being constructed as the owner of the penis produces a curious sensation of transgression for the female viewer, clearly one reason why gay male porn is popular with some lesbian and straight feminist porn consumers. We get to be in the representational 'top' position without dealing with the uneasy power dynamics cathected by heteroeroticism. Our complaint with pornography is not that we are being enticed cinematically to be masculine lookers, but that socially we object to alienating and abusive representation of women in the storyline of much classic porn. Changing the status of the women in pornography is quite easy: the new couple-aimed videos are clearly working with the notion that there is a conflict between women's increasing social power and their position in the bedroom.

Depicting female pleasure for a female spectator is a much more difficult problem. First of all, there is cultural uncertainty about what constitutes female sexual pleasure. Female sexual pleasure is not synonymous with orgasm, and images of female sexual pleasure have been used to indicate male sexual pleasure, as in mainstream movies, and product satisfaction, as in glossy advertisements. Even though the nature of female orgasm has come under debate in the last two decades – the clitoral orgasm, G-spot, anal sex – female sexual pleasure is still depicted through facial expressions: the transcendent glazed-over eyes, lips glistening and slightly parted, head thrown back.

Deep Throat (directed by Gerard Damiano, 1972) represents a challenging combination of acknowledging the inscription – the displacement – of female orgasm by feminist and sexological debate. The film

was aimed at a mixed gender market, and was designed to 'cross over' into art cinema houses. Radical feminists claim – with testimonials – that the film became a vehicle for convincing women to fellate their husbands, but this raises several interesting questions: at least some of these men had been getting fellated in the seedy porn cinemas by men. How did the representation of a woman with a clitoris in her throat – that is, a woman who achieved orgasm through fellation – transform this previously homosexual practice? What is the relationship between male castration anxiety (mouth/teeth: vagina/teeth) and the wish to give women pleasure by stimulating their throat/clitoris? A peculiar compaction of sliding signifiers, indeed!

This depiction of female sexual pleasure is also used in traditional pornography: only the acting is worse than in Hollywood. Women, at least, recognise that the woman is acting; nevertheless this convention is widely accepted as a representation of orgasm, as opposed to the documentarity of the male come shot. (It is unclear to me, still, how and when the come shot arose. Handmade gay male pornographic drawings from the interwar years showed penises spewing semen, presumably in order to draw some narrative closure to the sketches. Other than centuries of graffiti, I have not found a similar convention within straight pre-commercial pornographic representations. Recently, some heterosexual magazine porn has begun to include a come shot in photospreads, although this practice seems to have dropped out of gay porn magazines, which have moved more in the direction of poses, rather than story sequences. The role of come shots in non-cinematic porn is an area requiring more systematic enquiry.)

But if men easily accept the orgasmic veracity of this ecstatic woman, women are suspicious of her representational status. We know the pervasive orgasm in advertising and mainstream film is more than acted, it is faked. We find it silly and offensive that men accept this pathetic orgasm in classic pornography. Women are going to be a rather difficult audience for our new video pornographers to please.

The narrative differences in the representation of female and male sexual pleasure create a production problem for our new porn manufacturers. Culturally, female orgasm is understood as mimetic and mystical. It can be extended indefinitely in time. Male orgasm is *ciné vérité*; extending it would require repetition of a narrative sequence of stimulation, erection, ejaculation. The male sexual narrative moves from multiple angles of him fucking or being sucked, to withdrawal, masturbation, orgasm: a movement from body to genitals. Female sexual pleasure is lushly photographed but the shots are incoherently related to her orgasm. The female sexual narrative moves from genitals, to full body shot, to facial expressions: careening dizzily from genitals to body to face.

Thus, male and female sexual narratives are, at present, constituted through different systems of punctuation: the male narrative ends with a come shot and the female narrative . . . well, we aren't sure if women's

multiple orgasms ever stop. An option for our porn film-makers might have been depicting female orgasm for the female spectator through the figure of the masturbating woman. However, cinematically, this figure is too easily taken over as an extension of the male spectator – unless the scene was shot through the eyes of the woman in the film, the female viewer would vacillate anxiously between owning this orgasm as hers and understanding that she produced it from the position of male spectator.

Interestingly, even in the heterosexual porn videos produced for women by women, the film is never shot from the woman character's point of view. The female viewer is allowed to gaze upon the male body as voyeur, but is never sutured to the position of the woman in the film, who is rarely depicted as a voyeur. The sex is represented as non-transgressive, although glitzier than the old XXX films. The videos made by women lack a problematic that creates a narrative structure and thus function like a 'fuck film': generally there are multiple sequences with no clear reason for beginning, no clear orgasmic moment (atypical in male porn, but consistent with the current cultural conceptualisation of female sexual pleasure), little post-coital resolution. In addition, such films construct women watching women, women watching men, but never women watching women watch men. The chief differences that mark these videos as addressing women are the lack of a male come shot, the foregrounding of the women's sexual agenda, and lack of the goddess mystique that provided the rationale for the strong women characters in soft-core productions like the *Emanuelle* series and their rip-offs. Indeed, the woman-produced women's porn videos are of the sensibility of the 'ordinary woman' feminist films of the 1970s: they are anti-aesthetic, neo-realist, earnest attempts to show how women see themselves.

Thus, under current codes, the only remaining option for depicting female sexual pleasure is lesbian sex. And this is indeed what has happened in the new couple-oriented videos. There are mini-narratives where the female characters have sex with other women and the orgasms are coded rather differently to the classic postures of female pleasure. These orgasms are also coded differently than the pseudo-pleasure of women when they have sex with men in the same video. These female/female narratives are complete, bounded by use of various cinematic strategies, and clearly unrelated to any male sexual narrative.

Going into the 1980s, then, representation of orgasm in pornography was highly gender-differentiated, with male orgasm depicted through the come shot, and female orgasm depicted through highly stereotyped facial expressions which were probably widely understood as 'acting' and which were identical to depictions of female pleasure in advertising and mainstream cinema. Thus, male orgasm was depicted as real, essential, indisputable, while female orgasm was constructed, a signification in the face of an event occurring elsewhere, if at all. The difference in these orgasms was unproblematic because pornography was directed at

and viewed almost exclusively by men. They became problematic as a result of the demands of female viewers.

'Pumping Irene: The Woman': Ripping Off Mainstream Film

One of the most immediately noticeable features of this new genre of pornography is the thinly-disguised spoof on popular mainstream films. One method of providing viewer access – both for people not used to pornographic conventions and for people self-conscious about watching explicit sex without a hook – is to select plots which are known to the audience, or situations which are socially understood to be particularly ripe for *double entendre*. *Pumping Irene: The Woman* (1987) employs both. More loosely tied to the plot of *Pumping Iron: The Women* than numerous other films are to their mainstream referent, *Irene* nevertheless employs music and opening titles very similar to the documentary original. In addition, it makes full use of the sexual undertones of gym language and weight-lifting apparatus.

The video frequently employs a stock long shot of a rugged Marin County, California retreat set high on a hill to indicate the fantasy, other world aspect of the experiences we witness. The camp is operated by Irene, a blonde, very muscular, butch goddess. Her assistants include two women who are depicted as non-goddesses, women who do their job because they like it, not because it is an opportunity to display a higher erotic transformative power. We discover early on that the women are expected to take care of both male and female weekenders: one of the women begins trying to avoid being assigned any women, but accepts the challenge of a particularly uptight WASP woman after Irene reminds her that each type of 'problem' represented by the camp's clientele deserves equal treatment.

The clients are tired yuppies: each has a sexual hang-up resulting from some aspect of contemporary society. The characters arrive separately (except for the sole married couple), but their stories become intertwined to explore psychic elements of gender relations.

Mr Klen, an uptight male lawyer who is excessively concerned about his body odour (the staff call him 'Mr Clean') is eventually paired with Ms Brunhandel (called 'Ms Broomhandle' by staff). His cure is a three-way with Brunhandel and a female staff member in which the staff member is literally in between – Brunhandel is on a weight bench, the staff member performs cunnilingus while Mr Klen fucks her. Klen and Brunhandel then return to a bedroom and complain about the low morals of the staff and finally have sex together: this time Klen, having overcome his concern about body odour (his armpits metaphorise her cunt) performs cunnilingus (fucking the staff woman while she performs cunnilingus has purified the act). Likewise, Brunhandel, having overcome her resistance to sex by having been sucked while her partner was fucked, mounts Klen and fucks him.

The third and fourth characters, whose homoeroticism is triangulated by Irene and the second staff member, are a former baseball player who lost his nerve and now falls asleep all the time, and a rich boy who lives off his father's ranches and thinks he can have everything he wants. These two men are room-mates at the camp and their parallel quests for the women they want form the overarching narrative continuity of the video. The baseball player, coded as the working-class stud who has everything but can't get it up anymore, must beat Irene at arm wrestling before he is allowed to have sex with her. The rich kid must outrun the third staff woman in order to have sex with her. There are several scenes of the two men weight-lifting together, each working out the body part which will win him his woman. We also see each man in his contest – losing. The facial expressions in their workouts are semi-orgasmic: each strains and grimaces with no release. The video ends with each achieving his goal. The remarkable ending portrays the baseball player in an extremely romantic sex scene which ends with a very long, hot, kiss, quite unusual in pornography.

The only other kiss in the film is between Irene and Mrs D, a fashion designer whose husband, Mr D, lives off her money. Mr D is also coded as a macho, working-class stud, and as Italian or Latino. Mr and Mrs D's story forms the most remarkable part of the video. After examining the techniques used to introduce the characters and suture in the viewer as voyeur-therapist, I shall examine their story in detail.

These characters and hints of their sexual problem, as well as their professional status, are introduced in *Hill Street Blues*-like fashion at the beginning of the video. Each character comes down a stairway into a reception area. As they come through the door, they are freeze-framed and a voice-over introduces them. Voice-over is rarely used in video pornography (though ironically, and with different intent, much XXX peep show and cinema porn employs an endless loop soundtrack produced separately from the films and used with many different films; the ultimate, perhaps, in the separation of sound and picture). This technique positions the viewer as having special knowledge of the problems of the people about to be seen. In addition, like *Hill Street Blues*' introductory problematic, the technique suggests that these are stories that will be resolved by the end of the video and within the magical confines of Irene's health camp. The construction of the characters as 'having a story' which needs resolution enables the mini-narratives to set a problem, demonstrate a solution, and have a final sequence in which the character demonstrates a corrected sexuality. This creates the opportunity for a lot of sex but, most importantly, provides a rich social context in which to metaphorise the sex. No sex is without meaning in this video: every act restores the characters to their naturalised state (with the possible exception of Mr D . . . but I will argue that the Ds' story is really Mrs D's story, and that it is constructed for the female viewer, and as a result, his sexual problem must remain just that).

Mr and Mrs D are introduced with this voice-over:

'Her money, her designs, her hard work, almost her nervous breakdown. Now here's a relationship that could use some equalising. He needs to come down a few pegs, and she needs a big lift.'

A few segments later, we see them having sex in their room. The scene is long and particularly athletic, with the couple assuming about six different positions. Mrs D produces the traditional gauzy looks of sexual excitement, while Mr D performs his acrobatics. As he is about to come, she says, 'Wait for me, honey'. But he doesn't. The usual come shot occurs – in badly-edited slow motion – and then Mr D plops down somnolent on the bed. Mrs D frowns and tries to wake him, he begins to snore, and she rolls away, props her head on her pillow and pouts.

The next morning all the guests are assembled to receive their assignments. Mr D is still perplexed about why they have come here. He clearly does not realise that he has a 'sexual problem'. This ignorance is a remarkable feature of the video: the actual athletic sex he engages in, and the response of Mrs D are not, cinematically, distinguishable from any other sex in the video (except one segment with Mrs D discussed below). Mr D is set apart by the interactions around his 'treatment'. Clearly, the film-makers perceived lack of female satisfaction to be unrepresentable – Mrs D only voices her unhappiness and pouts, she does not act as if she is not enjoying sex with her husband. Thus, female orgasm is still understood as something totally subjective: you can't really demonstrate her orgasm or lack of orgasm.

Mr and Mrs D are assigned to different workout rooms. At first, Mr D is upset: he seems to think that the weekend is for endless sex with his wife. But the two staff tell him he is to get a 'special treatment'. He looks slightly sheepish to be getting extra-curricular sex. He is clearly not concerned about Mrs D, who is about to be taken off by Irene, and tells her: 'Do whatever she tells you, honey'.

In the next segment, Mr D is doing bench presses. He keeps asking for more weights, until he becomes pinned under the bar. The two (female) staff members laugh, begin kissing each other and leave him trapped. In an adjacent room, Mrs D is learning how to lift weights. The following dialogue provides the seduction:

Irene: So you want to be strong.

Mrs D: I guess so. Aren't you afraid of looking . . . masculine?

Irene: No one has mistaken me for a boy yet. Don't you want to know how it feels to be a strong woman, or how a strong woman feels?

They begin 'pectoral' exercises which enable Irene to begin caressing Mrs D's breasts. With classic 'feminine' concern, Irene asks Mrs D if she's 'okay'.

Mrs D: 'I guess I'm a little nervous.'
Irene: 'I know exactly how you feel.'

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The women begin to have sex. Lest the viewer wonder if this is the traditional lesbian scene in which the man will appear to show them how to 'do it right', we are shown Mr D, still trapped under the bar twice more during the eleven-minute sex scene between Mrs D and Irene.

There are several remarkable aspects to this scene, even though it does have the aura of the sex goddess helping the innocent nymph discover pleasure. Mrs D acts her pleasure quite differently in this scene. She makes eye contact with Irene, touches her own breasts and thighs, and employs a different set of facial expressions (which seem more directly related to her own pleasure). Mrs D also performs cunnilingus to Irene: in classic porn where the lesbians are performing for men, the characters generally maintain a role separation. In this video, Mrs D not only learns how to achieve pleasure, she learns how to give it. Her attention to Irene is more active than her mere receptivity to her husband. This will be played out again in the closing scene.

Finally, there is a long and very sexy kiss between Irene and Mrs D. Kisses are rarely used in pornography and signify deeper emotion. The kiss is threatening for two reasons: first, it brings emotion into the pornography, potentially disrupting the thrill of untrammelled sex. But second, kisses are non-gendered, reciprocal, and non-role defined. Much of pornography plays on (often by disrupting) conventional signifiers of masculine/active and feminine/passive. The kiss is too democratic in western culture, a joint act of simultaneous action and reception.

Coda: Can Heterosexuality Work?

Now that Mrs D has learned to have pleasure, and Mr D has been punished by being trapped under the bar-bell, will they be able to have a more mutually satisfying sex life? The video answers our question in a very curious thirty-three second scene in which there is no build up or orgasm. The segment is clearly designed to resolve the problematic of the Ds' relationship and not intended to be a sexual turn-on.

We see the Ds in bed; this time, Mrs D is on top, back to Mr D – who is basically obscured to us – and facing toward the audience. She is bouncing happily on Mr D and stimulating her own clitoris. He is not to realise that she is creating her own orgasm. She says:

'Don't come yet, okay? Don't come until I tell you. Don't come, honey, or I'll break it off.'

Pumping Irene: The Woman is no feminist film. Mr D's hypersexuality and inattention to his wife is only problematised as something she has to learn to work around. Mr D is punished, but he is never retrained. He

ends up on the bottom with no control (in a clever reversal of their earlier sex scene), but we know he will still achieve sexual pleasure.

But how is this heterosexual pleasure? Mr and Mrs D have sex at the same time, but it is practically in spite of each other, not with each other. Thus, heterosexuality remains two irreconcilable narratives, which, in the 'post-feminist' era requires that the woman achieve 'equal pleasure', but only by engaging in more sophisticated deceptions. Mrs D will no longer fake an orgasm and do without pleasure, but she will hide from Mr D the orgasm she has produced by her own hand. The conventionality and linear narrative of male orgasm may prevent male viewers from 'reading' this little segment as Mrs D's pleasure: it may simply be perceived as 'not containing sex'. Female orgasm remains a deceit by the characters in the video; sexual pleasure plausible to the female viewer is constructed for her in a secret language inscribed over the classic male narrative.

THE RAYMOND WILLIAMS MEMORIAL FUND

After consultation with the Williams family a group of students, colleagues, and friends of Raymond Williams in Cambridge have decided to present a tree and wooden bench inscribed to his memory to the Wedgwood Memorial College at Barlaston, as a simple and appropriate gesture of our respect. The Wedgwood College is an adult residential centre which the WEA helped to found in 1945.

The overwhelmingly positive response to this idea has encouraged us to appeal more widely for support. The Fund will go to the Wedgwood Memorial College to help first-time, unwaged, or educationally disadvantaged adult students who may be living in urban deprivation or rural isolation, or who wish to work in radical areas associated with Raymond Williams in which funding is often hard to obtain.

THE ADULT EDUCATION MOVEMENT

Raymond Williams worked full-time as a tutor in adult education from 1946 - 1961.

"... I've often defined my own social purpose as the creation of an educated and participating democracy. The WEA taught me much, in defining these terms. It has always stood for the principle that ordinary people should be highly educated, as an end justifying itself, and not simply as a means to power. It does not see the good things in society as benefits to be handed down by an elite, or as bargaining counters to win favours of an electorate. In the end, it has insisted, they will only be good things if people have made them for themselves."

- Raymond Williams, An Open Letter to WEA Tutors (1961)

We hope that Raymond Williams' past and recent colleagues, WEA and other students, academics and general readers who admire his work will join us in establishing this memorial to an outstanding educator.

Please make cheques payable to The Raymond Williams Memorial Fund and send them to Dr Morag Shiach, 11 Hobart Road, Cambridge, CB1 3PU, enclosing s.a.e. if you require a receipt.

VIEWDATA

EVELYN CAULETA REID LOOKS INTO THE TELEVISION VIEWING HABITS OF YOUNG BLACK WOMEN IN LONDON

A series of interviews with young black women in London forms the first stage of what will build into a detailed comparative survey of television viewing habits. This article suggests some tentative conclusions, but is mainly intended to provide an indication of the material on which the survey will be based. Most analyses of blacks are based on the assumption that there is a relatively homogeneous black perspective, most blacks have similar views on political and social issues. However, I shall aim to isolate the factors that lead to *differences* in attitudes toward television among young black women. In the same way, while research often focuses upon the effects of the media on attitudes and behaviour, the degree to which orientation *toward* the media is itself a function of attitudes, behaviours and socio-economic characteristics is seldom examined: I shall consider this relatively ignored aspect, primarily in relation to race.

Respondents were asked which programmes they watched and why, which ones they were less likely to watch and why, and their opinions of the portrayal of black people and programmes aimed at ethnic minorities. I recorded the interviews and analysed the material.

This raised a number of issues. The first of these concerned the notion of watching television from a particular socio-cultural position. The second involved the nature of television messages and mode of address – how much do the aesthetic codes of television affect viewing orientation? The third examined the ways in which variables such as race, age, education, gender, or religion themselves influence viewing, and the fourth, the effects of their interrelationships. The evidence

suggest that people view television from a multiplicity of positions of identity in any one day. John Fiske and John Hartley argue that:

*Social mobility, changed historical conditions and changes in what Marx (1968, p 117) calls the entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life have produced among all groups in our culture a complex set of interrelations with other groups, a pervasive intersubjectivity whereby clear-cut distinctions between them are difficult to discern. The same applies to individuals – each one of us holds mutually contradictory beliefs about our position in society, and we respond to our condition in different ways at the same time.*¹

The questions to ask, therefore, are: Which of these bases of identity are salient? Which of them is (or ought to be) served by television? How do they operate in combination? What are the effects upon the spectator?

The sample of those interviewed was as follows: I interviewed twenty-three black women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Five were pupils at a mixed comprehensive school; three were media workers; two were students, one on a media degree course, the other on a B TECH National Diploma course; three were unemployed; there were six office workers; a library assistant; a fashion house sample machinist; a doctor's receptionist and part-time youth worker; and a crèche worker. Among the

¹ John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television*, London, Methuen, 1978, p 103.

twenty-three interviewed, four were single mothers, and four were active members of the Pentecostal church.

The interviews consisted of group discussions and individual interviews. Certain groups were no doubt privileged by this method. The media workers and the student on the media course were more informed about media ownership and structure as well as programme form and content. In group discussions some respondents tended to be overshadowed by more dominant members.

The questions were:

Do you watch television?

How much do you watch?

What are your favourite programmes?

Why do you like them/What don't you like about them?

What programmes would you make a special effort to watch? Why?

What don't you like watching? Why?

Do you watch programmes specifically about women/black people?

Are all channels on television the same?

What kinds of programmes would you like to see on TV?

What do you think of the portrayal of black people on TV?

It must be stressed that these questions only formed the framework of the interviews. Many other issues arose in discussion as a result of the response of particular interviewees – for instance, discussions frequently spilled over to include the print media, especially the *Sun* newspaper, the police, responsibilities of black actors and artists and the 'struggles' of black people in general.

The media workers questioned were critical of the approach of this research and projects like it because, they argued, emphasis should be placed on the development of black aesthetics which they see taking place in small video workshops. This comment from one of them sums up the sentiment:

I believe the premise of your paper is wrong. The very structure of your paper is in a way endorsing the society we live in and the structure of television by asking us to comment on it. What would be more positive, in my opinion, is if you were asking me or trying to find black women generally who were doing something to counter and to redress the situation.

As expected, viewing was constrained by a

number of factors. Fourth-formers were more involved with outside entertainment and school activities such as games and rehearsals. Media workers were 'activists' and said they would rather be 'doing than watching' and argued that the bulk of television programmes made people less sensitive to the world around them. Women actively involved with religion said they often attend meetings on weekdays, and Sundays were mainly taken up with church activities. Mothers complained that interesting programmes often came on late at night when they were too tired to stay up and watch them after looking after their children most of the day; they, however, were the group most likely to watch daytime television.

Of those questioned, apart from the three media workers, most of the women's available television viewing time was spent watching soap operas. The fourth-formers, the unemployed, and some of the clerical workers were those most likely to make a point of watching them. The others, particularly the 'educated' group tended only to watch soap operas if they happened to be on. *EastEnders* and *Neighbours* were the most popular soaps. Those women who were at home during the day said they also watched programmes like *Falcon Crest*, and *The Young Doctors*. All respondents were critical of the black actors in these programmes and the realism of the shows:

*I watch soaps like **Neighbours**, all soaps really. **Coronation Street**, now, that's got interesting because of the black and white relationship. I used to be an avid fan of **EastEnders**: now that the black family is moved off I'll only watch it if I'm in.*

– clerk typist, aged 22

You didn't think that they were like your typical black family: I don't think that they were like that at all. Well, it's the way I was brought up, you know, with a loving mother and father. I mean, I thought Kelvin was too feisty. Plus, they showed the girl as a bully, beating up white kids, but I suppose they had Kelvin going to university and that sort of thing; they showed his father and mother pushing him to go to university and to do well, like parents do. Because I think there's this image that black people don't care about their kids, you know, that they don't want them to do well, to succeed or anything.

– library assistant, aged 24

They made it seem as if it was a broken home, as if to say all black people have those sorts of problems all the time. They didn't make it seem as if it was a happy relationship.

– receptionist, aged 25

They were just put there to say, yeah, we've got a black family, but other than that, they're not really too interested in them. I don't know any black family that go on like they did; I'm not saying there aren't any, but I don't know any. I'm a black person and I couldn't relate to anything in there. Maybe it's because I don't know any family like that.

– doctor's receptionist, aged 20

Brookside was less popular.

I've lost interest in Brookside. I used to watch it, it's down to earth but the issues they do are too serious. And I think EastEnders was advertised more at the beginning, and Brookside came on when Channel Four started and people didn't catch on to it, and people can't be bothered to start watching it now, because they're not into it.

Considering that Liverpool is supposed to have a lot of black people, you've only had one black girl in the programme, and they killed her off.

– student, aged 21

EastEnders is more gossipy, it's more about what's going to happen to him, what's going to happen to her and although they're true to life, they go a bit over the top, whereas Brookside is dead serious.

– clerk, aged 21

Two said it was their favourite soap because of its realism:

My favourite is Brookside, I just think it's good, it's more realistic because in EastEnders, everybody lives in a square, and everybody knows everybody's business and everything; they're always arguing. They're just too close to each other.

– clerk, aged 20

Because I know the North, it's more realistic, because it's pretty hard living in Liverpool – it's typical life.

– unemployed woman, aged 25

Dynasty and Dallas were the least popular of the soaps, because they were too far-fetched, way-out

and unrealistic, but eight said they would watch them, if they happened to be in. Those who watched them said that the programmes' appeal lay in the clothes and the glamour:

They're all right but it's a bit unreal. Sometimes they take too long to get to the point, but it's all right apart from that. I like the clothes, really.

– sample machinist, aged 18

Because of the way they talk about money, you know, all their millions, it's so unreal and their big shoulder pads – and they're always coming in with somebody new, or some long-lost relative. It really puts me off.

– sixth-former, aged 17

I like Dynasty, I don't like Dallas. Maybe it's because I know what's going to happen. I like the fashion world. I don't know what it's like to be rich, but they always seem to have money all the time. It seems like something always happens to a rich person, something always goes wrong, somebody is always threatening somebody, or something.

– unemployed woman, aged 25

The next most popular programme was the *Cosby Show* with ten saying that they would try hard to watch it or would video it. Four respondents said that they used to make a special effort to watch it when it first came out, but wouldn't now. The media workers, the two students and the library assistant said they would not go out of their way to see it, or any other television programme, as they often had other things to do. All had seen the programme at some time but were critical of it:

Some people say it's boring because it's like they are the perfect family, but for me because black people are portrayed so negatively in all other aspects I don't care. I mean, why can't black families be portrayed as good, why should they put on more negative things when that's been chucked at us every day? I think they should come out with positive things and give other black people something to stand up for.

– doctor's receptionist, aged 20

I don't find it so funny now, it's kind of repeating itself. It's got a bit boring, it's not as good as it used to be. I don't really make an effort to stay in and watch anything any more.

– student, aged 21

I think it's a bit extreme; they could have had somebody who's a bit in-between. I mean, he's really rich, he lives in a big house with all his kids, and I just think that it's a bit unrealistic. There's no in-between.

– library assistant, aged 24

Cosby, he's an upper-class doctor, big house, lots of money and five kids. Now, there's no way that kids like that could grow up in a black family and act the way they do. The children – they listen to their parents, but they're not exactly disciplined, I mean, they get away with murder. There's no discipline in the family whatsoever because they just do what they want to do.

– clerk, aged 22

Amen, another comedy from America was most popular, not surprisingly among the church-goers, as were gospel programmes such as *People Get Ready*, *Everybody Say Yea* also from the States, which they said they would make an effort to watch or video. Ten of the respondents had not watched *Amen* but had heard about it. The least favourite kind of programmes among all respondents was sitcoms – one person said that she did not watch them at all. The consensus was that comedy shows were boring, racist and old-fashioned. Three respondents said that *French and Saunders* was one of their favourites. *The Young Ones*, Jasper Carrot and Russ Abbot were thought to be exceptions to the run of the mill. There was a mixed reaction to comic Lenny Henry. Four interviewees thought he was as bad as white comedians because he was overly preoccupied with the negative aspects of black culture:

In a way I don't like him, because he still portrays stereotyped images of black people.

– receptionist, aged 25

Lenny Henry – he reminds me of a white person. He acts really stupid; it just don't suit a black person. His jokes are more geared to white people than black people.

– sample machinist, aged 18

However, the majority thought that his jokes weren't derogatory, and that he was just a good comedian:

Lenny Henry's depiction is good because you feel

you've met someone or you know someone that he's depicting. He's speaking as a black person who's been in a situation and knows what he's talking about. If a white person makes those sorts of jokes you think they are getting at black people for not saying things properly, because what they do isn't how black people speak.

– library assistant, aged 24

The media workers, library assistant, and a media student said they would try to watch different kinds of documentaries including those about black people, but their selection depended on the subject matter. The younger viewers, the unemployed and clerical workers watched few documentaries, but said they would make a special effort to watch those about black people because:

Sometimes you just want to see what other people's experiences are, don't you? You know what your experience is; you just want to see how life affects everybody else.

– clerk, aged 20

*I just like to watch each individual situation and it's always up-dated and you always see something new or a new situation that you haven't seen before. I mean like the **Black and White** programme – that was an issue in itself.*

– doctor's receptionist, aged 20

There was a consensus about the way documentaries about black people are presented: they were useless to black people. They reinforced negative imagery, they were voyeuristic, they were only useful when they told black people what they could do about a particular situation, they were often taken out of context. Most said that they felt depressed while the programmes were on, but that they made them more determined to succeed in life. Some said they didn't watch documentaries about South Africa because they found them too depressing and that they didn't show the whole picture:

The problem with these kinds of programmes is that journalists think that they are just there to raise the problem. Now I'm saying that the media are there to do a lot more. If they wanted to, they could use TV to eliminate racism. You can't use laws, but you can use the media to challenge the way people think, because you're telling them what to think through it. And so the whole notion that it's enough to just

explore a problem is redundant, defunct and invalid. The whole idea that journalists are neutral and objective is invalid. Now programmes that address racism should address it from the point of view that they can actually be part of the process of stopping it.

– media worker, aged 24

If the programme approached the issue with a view to arriving at some conclusions as to what black people can do about the situation, fine, but all they do is show – as if to say this is it, it's a fait accompli; we have no resources to challenge this. They present us as hapless victims again and again.

– media worker, aged 25

I get tired of seeing black people presented as the hopeless subject, the subjects who can't look after themselves, who can't do anything with their lives.

– media student, aged 21

All the time they just show Africa and the famine. They never show any part where they've improved it, for the amount of millions that's gone over there. That's the most hurtful part of it. If it's any programme where black people are concerned they always show you the worst part.

– sample machinist, aged 18

I think they spend too much time on those programmes. They don't put across enough positive ones. They don't put on anything good that black people do – it's all down hill one way.

– clerk, aged 21

You've got this white camera crew and this white presenter and they go to find out things that you know, as a black person, exist already – so sometimes they're not really saying much you don't know. They see black people as the problem. They don't see it from a black person's point of view – that it's the white people who've got the problem and black people are just reacting to the way they are treated.

– library assistant, aged 24

All respondents had seen some episodes of the BBC documentary about racism in England, *Black and White*; some had videoed it. The programme got a mixed reception:

It doesn't get black people further. But at least black

people, when they go for a job, can realise whether they are being discriminated against. I think white people will be more defensive.

– unemployed woman, aged 21

I watched the follow-up programme. What I want to see is a programme from a totally black perspective. I want the day to come when black people are making their own programmes which don't specifically say you were racist to me because of this, this and this. I just want them to portray their day-to-day realities from a total black perspective. As a black woman watching that programme, it has no use to me. For a white audience it's useful for them to see it, but it has no use for me.

– media worker, aged 22

I think it's good that they're showing that, despite people phoning up, like on Open Air, and saying it's an invasion of people's privacy, that it's wrong. I think it's got to be aired.

– student, aged 21

I think they should have done it the other way round as well, you know, black ladies as well.

– fourth-former, aged 15

Programmes aimed at ethnic minorities like *Ebony*, *Black on Black* and the *Bandung File* were considered important viewing. However, some respondents felt that there was a danger of ghettoisation and that these programmes should appeal to a wider audience, that there should be more black people in mainstream programmes. The term 'ethnic minorities' was offensive to the media workers who said it implied pagans and heathens. All respondents were critical of their seasonal scheduling because they could never be sure when one was going to be shown.

The whole idea of having separate programmes and departments for black people is one way of the BBC getting itself off the hook. I want them to integrate, to find a different approach and not call it ethnic minorities anything. I want a total change. I accept that to an extent there might be a complementary need in addition to the thorough reappraisal of their approach on programme policies. I mean, you can still justify the instance of a separate unit specifically to address certain issues, but on its own it's just a little speck in a whole sea of racism.

– media worker, aged 24

*I'd like to see more black people generally, not in specialist programmes like *Ebony* or whatever.*

They should just show them as a whole in the mainstream programmes, not any Tom, Dick and Harry, but really good ones.

– library assistant, aged 24

*Why can't we have a black programme like **Ebony** which is not just talking about the black experience? Why can't we have it on everything? Why can't black people get a chance to comment in general on everyday life?*

– media worker, aged 22

I reckon there should be more things, like black programmes or even with black and white. I reckon they should mix it a bit, so everyone gets to watch it. If it's just black people, they're going to start saying look how black people come and take over their country, you know, and stuff like that.

– fourth-former, aged 15

***Ebony** was the most popular. The majority had not hear of the *Bandung File*; it was only popular with the media workers, the library assistant and the media student. Their criticisms were that:*

*Most of the time they [**Ebony**, **Black on Black**] feature the arts and entertainment too much, like that's the only thing that we've got. Except the *Bandung File* which is more political.*

– library assistant, aged 24

Because of the framework within which they are trying to accommodate ideas, they run out of ways of seeing. The formula within which they present information is necessarily superficial.

– media worker, aged 24

*What happens on programmes like **Ebony** is that they run out of ideas and then it starts getting repetitive, and they look at the same thing from one angle and then another angle. The problem is format – the magazine framework is too restricting. They are trying to cover everything; they can't be very in-depth, they haven't got the space.*

– media worker, aged 25

Films of any genre were popular with all respondents. But there was a preference for US films among younger viewers, the unemployed, and some clerical workers, because they had 'a lot of action' and they were 'fast moving', and there was a preference for foreign and experimental films by media workers. *LA Law* and *Cagney*

and *Lacey* was frequently mentioned as being 'really good programmes'. But, again, the portrayal of black people was problematic, especially in old films. This comment was typical:

One thing I really hate are those stupid black nurses with their eyes popping out and their lips are highlighted and they speak funny, or people portrayed as slaves.

– fourth-former, aged 15

Game shows and quizzes provoked little reaction except from the media workers who thought they were the sort of programmes that made people less sensitive to the world around them. The majority said that they might have programmes like that on in the background.

Pop shows such as *Top of the Pops* and *The Chart Show* did not rate highly, even among the younger viewers. They made no particular effort to watch, except at times when black groups were high in the charts and therefore likely to be featured on such shows – as happened recently with the black reggae group, Aswad. Programmes like *Solid Soul*, *Soul Train*, and *Club Mix* were more likely to be of interest, but, even so, most preferred their music live, record or on pirate radio stations.

If there's something good in the charts, it's normally about six months after you've heard it and you know it already, or you've even forgotten it. I think Aswad being number one is really good.

– clerk, aged 20

*They're basically for white people; I mean, you look at the audience and you'll see it's white faces. They don't really put on a lot of black people on **Top of the Pops**. You had *Soul Train* on Channel Four – now that was a mixture. All right the groups were black because it was soul music, but they had whites and blacks in the audience. There was a mixture; when they took the cameras round you had white faces and the black faces. On **Top of the Pops** you'll be lucky if you see a black face.*

– clerk, aged 22

*Q: What don't you like about **Top of the Pops**?*

It's white, you know, you're watching the telly, and there's hardly any black people in the crowd. I can't stand the way they dance.

– fourth-former, aged 15

It looks too acted out. Everything is too acted out. There's always that man, the DJ, and there's always girls around him, with those stupid little streamers and everything.

– fourth-former, aged 15

Four respondents (the single mothers and the media student) felt that there were more black people in children's programmes, but, being so few, their presence was tokenistic. *Sesame Street*, *Different Strokes*, *Open Air* and *Grange Hill* were mentioned as being exceptions because they did have a 'mixture'. The criticisms voiced about the portrayal of black people on British television, including adverts, concentrated on how far such representations were from their own experience. The scarcity of black people on television was another area of concern. It was as if the Cosby family had to represent all black families because it is the only regular programme about a black family:

The way they do TV over here, they can't portray black people properly because they don't understand them. They don't know how to portray them. Whereas in the States they've been there longer and they've got a lot more freedom. Black people have been in America longer and they get a lot more chances.

– student, aged 21

It is evident from the survey that age, education and gender as well as race influenced television viewing practice. Black adolescents, like their white counterparts, were less inclined to watch television, and more likely to pursue other interests – listening to music, doing homework, going out with friends. Their viewing habits were, to some extent, constrained by those of their parents. However, the decision to view particular pop programmes and documentaries was often influenced on grounds of race. Education, rather than just age, was an important factor in determining viewing. The more highly educated young women were more selective, watched a wider selection of programmes and were less likely to be influenced on programme choice by race. Race, however, was a factor in wishing to retain programmes like *Ebony* and to have black people better represented in mainstream programming. The most popular programmes were soap operas. Here, gender and

class considerations were as influential as those of race – though one respondent said of the *Cosby Show*: 'When you watch it, you don't think of them as a black family; you think they're like you.'

In her research on soap opera, Dorothy Hobson found that working class women were less inclined to watch documentaries and current affairs programmes because they had: 'content which has little or no intrinsic interest for these women, and the way they are presented means that they exclude these women from "participation" at the point of identification with the items included.'² The black women in the survey differed in this context because, for them, news and current affairs about black people were a high priority – though other news and current affairs programmes were not.

John Fiske and John Hartley in 1978 state that one of television's functions as a social ritual is to draw into its orbit both the audience with which it communicates and the world to which it refers: 'Implicate the individual members of the culture into its dominant value-systems, by exchanging a status-enhancing message for the endorsement of that message's underlying ideology [as articulated in its mythology].'³

From the findings of this survey, it is evident that the value system and ideology of television messages about black people are not regarded as 'status-enhancing'. The following responses were typical:

If I see a black person on television I would watch although I wasn't too interested in the programme before. The mere fact that I see a black person intrigues me as to how they are using them. And then I'm going to be forever critical, and that to my mind makes it very uneasy for black people to exist and to live in this country because we are always critical. It's not our fault that we are always critical because we are so used to seeing ourselves so badly represented, and we're always going to be analysing and picking, and it makes you angry because you're having to do that. They seem to problematise the existence of black people

– media student, aged 21

² Dorothy Hobson, 'Housewives and the Mass Media', in *Culture, Media, Language*, London, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies/Hutchinson, p 112.

³ John Fiske and John Hartley, *op cit*, p 88.

We want more than maybe the average white viewer because we're talking about the establishment of a kind of history, a documentary, a documentation of an experience which has either been distorted or ignored. And so perhaps we are more conscious of the limitations of the existing programmes than maybe the average white person would be.

– media worker, aged 24

You're more aware of them when they're there because a black face is not normally there, and you're more critical. They've got to deliver the goods otherwise they're just going to make things worse. I mean, if a news reader comes on or a politician, they've got to come over with the goods: otherwise you're not getting anywhere. Unless they know what they're talking about or they're doing positive

things, we're not moving forward, so you're rooting for them all the time.

– doctor's receptionist, aged 20

As time goes on and there are more black people on TV we won't be so critical, but because it's rare you do find yourself being more critical.

– student, aged 21

Despite the preliminary nature of this study and the need for caution in making conclusions, it seems clear that analyses of viewing practice which are open to considerations of gender, age, education and/or class, but which ignore questions of race are inadequate. The ways in which *all* these factors interrelate and influence viewing patterns require further research.

THE BURDEN OF MAX HEADROOM

BY BARRY KING

¹ I am indebted to Keith Waters, Mitch Mitchell and Andrea Sisk for information and help in preparing this article.

² *Cinefantastique*, vol 18, no 1, December 1987 pp 29 and 58.

MAX HEADROOM, 'the world's first computer generated TV presenter', made his debut on Channel Four on April 4, 1985 in an hour-long mini-feature (repeated on April 4, 1988). The narrative context in which Max was introduced 'explained' his origin in the metamorphosis of Edison Carter (played by Matt Frewer) into an entity whose mode of being was apparently hyper-real.¹

This transition, from a field of representation whose principal mechanisms of coherence refer to a state of external being, towards one in which the principal mechanisms of coherence refer to a state of self-sufficient knowing or textuality, seemed of itself to provide a metaphor for the power of computer-generated imagery to produce autotelic entities of the kind so emphasised by Baudrillard. Not merely did Max visibly (that is to say, as made visible by the spatial and temporal mechanisms of the foregoing narrative) seem to signal a new level of representation in which textuality was triumphantly divorced from context, but, at least as far as British audiences were concerned, this departure from the realm of 'classical' narrative with its attendant centred subjects had an aura of ontological finality about it. If Max Headroom was destined to have a point of reference – itself a slippery and paradoxical notion for such a being – it was to be found in the interactive, decentred and verticalised space of the chat show, the music video and Coca-Cola advertising. Even if, as occurred subsequently in the United States, this departure from narrative was to prove reversible – Max was to enjoy a stardom as the 'computer generated' sidekick of Edison Carter in ABC's *Max Headroom Show*, currently being shown on Channel Four – the principle of Max's ontological 'break' was firmly established. He might move, for purposes of commercial exploitation, from the real – lens generated imagery with its conventionalised realism – to the hyper-real – computer generated simulation. But, for all this hesitation, his home was in the realm of simulation, only 'twenty minutes into the future'.²

In some respects, Max Headroom was far from being a novel invention, especially to devotees of sci-fi and the dystopian scenarios of post-

futurism. He was a species of cyborg: 'a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction'.³ Part human in the sense of having originated in Edison Carter (and, as was revealed subsequently, through being linked to a real-time event, Matt Frewer's performance), Max nonetheless was a computer-manipulated-fabrication. I will return to examine the implications of this rather hybrid pedigree subsequently but for the moment the general point can be sketched out. Max Headroom, the publicity implied, was not merely a more or less entertaining character, he was also a super-sign or plural signifier – an *iconic* sign 'whose content... is an entire proposition'.⁴

In Fredric Jameson's terms, Max was a symbol that denoted an allegorical master code or political unconscious whose signified elements are 'a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and collective fantasies'.⁵

The particular dimension of collective thinking and fantasising that Max evoked related to the discursive practice or cluster of practices that can be grouped under the term Artificial Intelligence or, more generally, cognitive science. Broadly conceived, the development of artificial intelligence – 'the construction of machines that think' – has followed two broad lines of development: (a) the construction of 'expert systems' that model interpretative/interactive processes such as chess playing, diagnostic or clinical situations; (b) industrial robotics, the construction of intelligent machines that perform physical operations on the external environment or at least mechanical devices that enact sequences implying a human intelligence in the setting of goals, standards of performance and reaction to changes in the external environment.⁶

Ultimately, these strands of AI research can be conceived as finding their convergence in the construction of human replicas or androids. As is well known, androids have already been subject to extensive fictionalised exploration, some of which predates the development of information technology⁷ and some of which are contemporary projections of the near future, e.g. *Blade Runner*, *The Exterminator*, *Android* and, most contemporary of all, *Making Mr Right*, directed by Susan Seidelman. Clearly a great deal of textual work – though Vivian Sobchack⁸ seems to have anticipated most of the relevant points – would be needed to tease out the various articulatory nuances these characterisations and their narrative motifs and motivations imply. But I wish to set such considerations on one side here in favour of making a number of general points that pertain to the cyborg as a particular form of agency or subject. Reflections on the cybernetic subject exhibit two broad if interrelated themes that bear on the issue of representation and reference.

The first theme interrogates the epistemological or ideological limits of artificial intelligence as a world view. What forms of understanding, with what kinds of limitations, articulations and suppressions are structured and reproduced by cybernetic systems? At the same time, the

³ D Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', *Socialist Review* 80, 1985, p 65.

⁴ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, London, Macmillan, 1977, p 231.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Social Symbolic Act*, London, Methuen, 1981, p 34, cf p 58.

⁶ Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1984 p 242 ff.

⁷ Raymond Bellour, 'Ideal Hadaly', *Camera Obscura*, no 15, Fall 1986, pp 111 ff. For a more general consideration, see D Idhe, *Existential Technics*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1983, pp 9-23 and A Wilden, 'Changing Frames of Order: Cybernetics and the Machina Mundi' in K Woodward (ed), *The Myths of Information*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, pp 219-241.

⁸ Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, New York, Ungar, 1987, ch 4.

⁹ Bill Nichols, 'The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems', *Screen* Winter 1988, vol 29 no 1, pp 22-46.

'architecture' of cybernetic systems, their programming features as 'ways of seeing', are simultaneously ways of processing information. Such processing is not merely a passive event, it is active and can entail both mental and corporeal discipline as any word processor operator knows. Cybernetic systems are premised on interaction with other systems or the environment but most often on interaction with a concrete user, that requires conformity with a set of procedures and rules (algorithms) if certain predefined, concrete goals are to be realised. Such systems, therefore, do not merely offer a way of knowing, but have inscribed into their functioning an idealised mode of behaviour – a way of being. Accordingly, the question of the grounds of what is known rapidly turns into a second theme of cybernetic ontology – what kinds of subject, with what kinds of experience, are produced and reproduced by interaction with cybernetic systems?

This second theme opens out onto broader anthropological questions: what is the nature of the cybernetic subject *per se* and what does this reveal about the limits of human nature, conditioned as it is by unplanned or random factors of genetic coding and social endowment, such as class, race, gender and social inheritance? As a representative commentator on this area points out, this latter interrogation begins to effect a transvaluation, under the aegis of an equation of a Eurocentric, phallogocentric conception of intelligence with the 'stuff' of life itself, of the human/machine contrast. The cyborg no longer simulates intelligence, rather intelligence and core elements of human identity and being (genetic coding) are read as examples of cybernetic mechanisms. The cyborg ceases to be regarded as the subordinated creature of human intelligence and reason, and is increasingly viewed as a paradigm of such qualities: the materialised Platonic form of humanity – what 'we' could be if genetic and cultural environment conditions were removed or pragmatically manipulated in favour of some planned notion of the 'good' life.⁹

In this respect, Susan Seidelman's cybernetic comedy of manners, *Making Mr Right*, is an exemplary text. In the course of mounting a critique of North American masculinity and feminine concessions to patriarchal culture, it proposes Ulysses, an android, as a more perfectly realised 'human' being, more in touch with his emotions, than his human creator (both played by John Malkovich). This inversion of the Frankenstein myth, wherein the perfection of the creature confronts the limitations of the creator, takes as its rationale the familiar grounds that the latter's 'machine-like' addiction to 'scientific' rationality is a symptom of an underlying emotional incompetence characteristic of North American culture as a whole and North American men in particular. The patriarchal culture that can conquer space, is chronically unable to solve its basic emotional problems, not to mention social and economic problems which are offered no space in this particular narrative.

Through various narrative embeddings the cyborg is read by many

writers as a figure with potential for installing a radical representational politics. The machine-human interface is seen to function as a semiotic disturbance or excess that problematises the 'naturalness' of received stereotypes. In a path-breaking essay, Donna Haraway conjures the cyborg as a positive symbol for feminism in the 1980s and relatedly all the forces that oppose or are oppressed by the institutionalised binarisms of 'phallogocentric' culture – public/private, home/factory, nature/culture, masculine/feminine etc. Such oppositions, Haraway argues, are 'systematic, to the logic and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers and animals – in short, to domination of all those constituted as *others* whose task is to mirror the self'.¹⁰ As a metaphorical being, the cyborg threatens to expose the underlying artificiality of what, for the mainstream culture of the West at least, is represented as a concatenation of naturally-derived cultural categories. In a similar vein, Vivian Sobchack, in her impressive study of the sci-fi genre, identifies the Post-Futurist film as a text that stages the re-signing or recognition of the human body as a 'cultural, commodified and technological subject', a material process which empirically is still most in evidence in relation to women as 'the site of nature' to be 'mastered'.¹¹

Such readings, with which in general terms I would not want to disagree, focus on a central feature of the discourse of artificial intelligence, its abstraction from contextualised forms of understandings – power relationships, patterns of affect, intuition – and render this abstraction a positive force. If the cyborg is the product of a form of reasoning that suppresses context this is all to the good, since the context is precisely structured by the oppressive binarisms Haraway identifies. While it is clear that this implicit advocacy of cyborg identity is polemical in intent, it remains uncertain that the narrative deployment of the cyborg actually accomplishes what these authors imply. Whether one considers a tragic scenario, such as *Blade Runner*, or a comedy, such as *Making Mr Right*, it is clear that the cyborg, far from undermining institutional binarisms, in fact speaks in the name of a higher realisation. The replicant Pris (Daryl Hannah), described in *Blade Runner* as a 'basic pleasure model', is driven, along with the extravagantly masculinist Roy Baty (Rutger Hauer), to perpetuate her life-span as an emblem of sexist reductionism. Baty likewise, while extending mercy to Deckard (Harrison Ford) and lamenting the loss of his own memories, does little to suggest that his mode of being is problematic. Nor can it have escaped attention that, from *The Stepford Wives* to *Predator*, there is a tradition in which the cyborg does anything but challenge the notion that what is essential about human beings is their conformity to well-worn gender stereotypes and what stands behind these stereotypes, a catalogue of highly specific use values or functions – as an object of sexual desire, a thinking or killing machine. What troubles the characters in the usual cyborg scenario is not Heideggerian doubts about the grounds of being so much as Schwarzeneggerian doubts about the body count and how to avoid being on it. This reductive functionalisation is certainly consist-

¹⁰ D Haraway, op cit, p 96.

¹¹ Vivian Sobchack, op cit, p 237.

¹² Terri Toles, 'Video Games and American Military Ideology', in V Mosco and J Wasco (eds), *The Critical Communications Review*, vol 11, Ablex, New Jersey, 1985, pp 207-223, and Gillian Skirrow, 'Hellivision', in Colin MacCabe (ed), *High Theory/Low Culture*, Manchester University Press, 1986, pp 115-142.

¹³ Anthony Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*, London, Paladin, 1986. For some theoretical considerations on the relationship between text and experience see J Radway, 'Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects', *Cultural Studies*, vol 2, no 3, October 1988, pp 359-376.

ent with the parameters of cognitive science (and for that matter the commodification of labour power) but it is not obviously a challenge to phallogocentric binarisms. On the contrary, even the human characters (is Deckard a replicant?) are compelled to engage in activities (mandatory killing etc) which, from a feminist perspective such as Harraway's (much less a traditional humanist view), reduce the potential for the affirmation of difference and plurality.

At a more molecular level still, it is possible to argue that cybernetic being is structured around an identifiable essence (that constitutes its Platonic quality) which human beings lack. While cyborg beings are inscribed into a system of representation or symbolic field much like their human counterparts, they are so inscribed in a condition of complete inclusiveness. The being of the cyborg, if one wishes to draw Lacanian parallels with the human subject, does not predate its entry into the symbolic, but is constituted without a repressed, a residue or an outside *ab initio*. Such an existential completeness merely serves to underpin the fact that the cyborg is a creature of conscious, organised (logical) thought. Such thought may be reductive but it is complete within its own parameters. Robocop may have a 'repressed' unconscious but it is not original to cybernetic being: it is the memory of its human raw materials, Police Officer Murphy.

What such strictures suggest is that the popular conception of the cyborg as a reactionary phenomenon has at least a *prima facie* plausibility. While I would not want to assert that some radical potential cannot be read out of a particular cyborg scenario, it seems unlikely that such readings are unduly prioritised in audience understanding. For one thing, the examples of the genre that have widest circulation, e.g. *Terminator*, are heavily stereotypical at the level of characterisation and plot, not to mention aggressively sexist. It is one thing to intend *Robocop* to be a parody of authoritarianism, but quite another to have it read in that way by male adolescents who enjoy such films. It would be foolish, indeed, to ignore the imprint of extant cultural frameworks on the formation of the text (the market success of slash and dice movies as a model of successful movie-making for the youth market). Likewise, in regard to its consumption and reception, the masculinist culture of the video game, emerging from applications in the field of military training, arguably predisposes fans of the genre towards the pleasures of exterminism.¹² Moreover, this intertextual ecology of authoritarianism should be weighed against a broader backdrop of extratextual behaviour and experience in social relations, that routinely re-inscribes the perception that violence is a gender-specific form of problem solving appropriately undertaken by 'real' men and accepted by 'real' women as the proof of masculinity.¹³

The point here is not that Harraway and others are wrong to detect a positive hermeneutic underlying the cyborg phenomenon (the polysemy of the sign ensures such a reading cannot be ruled out) but rather that it is much more routinely mobilised by a negative hermeneutic – a process

of authoritarian capture in which the potential range of meanings (signifieds) open to a given signifier is progressively narrowed so that it becomes, in Bakhtinian terms, a signal.¹⁴

What does all this have to do with Max Headroom? I will argue that Max Headroom, notwithstanding his apparent de-centred subjectivity, is a sophisticated example of such a capture. Because what is essential to the figure of the cyborg is not that he or she behaves in a particular kind of way or is a particular kind of character, but rather that the cyborg represents all behaviour as goal-oriented: in short, as a program or a form of work. In Max's case, interpersonal relationships are rendered as a form of marketable skills and accordingly he represents the life experience and social horizons of the 'new' professional middle class. But before approaching the detail of this argument directly, an apparent obstacle stands in my way: the view that Max Headroom is a simulation, an order of sign in which the issue of reference is negated. None of the observers I have cited believe this to be the case; the issue between us, if any, is identifying which kind of interpretation most parsimoniously describes the functioning of the cyborg as a sign.

Max and Computer Simulation

In a recent article,¹⁵ Lili Berko covers many of the themes identified above – the reductive character of cognitive science, its psychologistic denial of the role of environmental or contextual factors in human thought processes, the assimilation of intellectual activity to computer intelligence, etc. For Berko, Max Headroom is paradigmatic of 'the high concept image [which] is propped upon a post modern aesthetic which insists upon the primacy of the image, an image which refuses to identify itself as a sign, rejecting the traditional dichotomy between signified and signifier, image and concept – a primacy which challenges contemporary notions of the relationship between subjectivity and spectatorship. Such imagery is overdetermined, but not so much in its latent content as in its adherence to the codes of simulation' (p 51).

The first query that can be raised about this formulation relates to its heavy reliance on Jean Baudrillard. The theoretical question – with, to be sure, pronounced extra-theoretical implications – is this: does the concept of simulation entail the loss of reference or, rather, its super-realisation? Baudrillard's account in *Simulations* argues that the drive towards perfectibility or super-resolution in the image, its hyper-reality, decisively ruptures the relationship between the referent and the signifier. In such a development, it is argued, the signifier inheres, because of its super resolution, as a self-sufficient entity that imposes its own signified. Such a signified screens off, destabilises and finally abolishes the possibility of reference:

... you can never really go back to the source, you can never interrogate an event, a character, a discourse about its *degree* of original reality.¹⁶

¹⁴ V Voloshinov (M Bakhtin), *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, New York, Seminar Press, 1973.

¹⁵ Lili Berko, 'Simulation and High Concept Imagery: The Case of Max Headroom', *Wide Angle*, vol 10, no 4, pp 50-61. While I am unhappy with Berko's arguments, I am clearly indebted to her herein.

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Work of Art in the Electronic Age', *Block* no 14, 1988, p 8 (my emphasis). See also Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1983.

¹⁷ Richard Allen, 'Critical Theory and the Paradox of Modernist Discourse', *Screen* Spring 1987, vol 28 no 2, especially pp 78-82.

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *op cit*, p 191 ff.

¹⁹ S Hall, *Block* no 14, *op cit*, p 11.

²⁰ It may also be a function of Baudrillard's very narrow terms of reference. Cf Jean Baudrillard, *America*, London, Verso, 1988, p 5.

²¹ Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*, London, Macmillan, 1984, p 158 ff.

This view of the hyper-real is clearly debatable. It might be said that it confuses the manner in which a referent is realised by a signifier with the question of its existence as an extra-discursive object or concept. Some signifiers gain their intelligibility (i.e. their logical and functional status) by reference to extra-discursive existents even though they minimise relations of resemblance in their semiotic action. Some signifiers have no external physical reference, e.g. the unicorn, but even these have conceptually-based referents materialised in other signs. In neither case does the absence of an original or the demonstrable action of the signifier on the meaning of the referent indicate the death of reference. No signifier, especially a visual or iconic sign, is restricted to an invariant monological relation of reference.¹⁷ In the first place, as Piercean semiotics points out, signs vary in their degree of conventionality and motivation. Or, in other words, the extent to which the substance of the referent enters into the formation of the sign and under which format of resemblance.¹⁸ Second, as Stuart Hall points out, multi-accentuality is not the evacuation or attenuation of reference, but the competition of a number of relations of reference bearing conflictually on one signifier.¹⁹ For Baudrillard, the struggle over meaning has already been lost, its terms and categories 'imploded'.

It is difficult not to suspect that Baudrillard's view of signification implicitly rests on a mechanical model of a one to one representational fit between the signifier and the referent. Clearly if a univocal relationship is essential to meaning, then many signs will appear empty of or beyond meaning.²⁰

The point is not to examine such matters exhaustively here. Such remarks only serve my purpose in so far as they contrast Baudrillard's notion of the hyper-real with Umberto Eco's. For Eco, the hyper-real is a super-resolved signifier that while referring to some, e.g. historical figure or event, is marked by an ambition to replace or re-incarnate the 'thing' it represents. Not, as Baudrillard would have it, the death of meaning, but the moment of its authoritarian reinscription. In other words, hyper-reality is not the field wherein the relation of reference is lost or evacuated, but so disambiguated that the signifier seems more real than the referent; becoming, in effect, the most unambiguous route to the signified. Indeed, it may in time come to colonise the signified. In such a process, the signifier becomes the Platonic other of all representations or signifiers that have a relation to the referent:

*The sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of reference, the mechanism of replacement. Not the image of the thing, its plaster cast. Its double, in other words.*²¹

Hyper-reality on this account is merely an extreme of the tendency for signifiers to exceed their referent, either by an extreme conventionalism or, as in the case of the hyper-real, by pushing the conventions of 'realism' to a point where the relations of motivation between the referent

and the signifier are reversed. This may be termed the Platonic inversion of the sign. The hyper-real does not abolish the referent but relies on its inherence to render intelligible its parodic, caricatural or Utopian effects.

Such considerations are central to Berko's treatment of Max Headroom. For one thing her analysis, while citing Teresa de Lauretis who has, in fact, advocated a Piercean approach to signification, rests on the Saussurean dichotomy of the signified and signifier, which is untenable when considering iconic forms of signification.²² Such a dichotomy, because of its bias towards the verbal sign, regards the relationship between the sign and referent as arbitrary. Clearly Max Headroom is not, even textually, in an arbitrary relation to Edison Carter, so on this reasoning Max cannot be a sign. He must therefore be 'a high concept image or simulation which bears no relation to any reality whatever.' Yet such an image, she continues, 'has its own data bank memory comprised of meaningful images which have become integral elements of our collective unconscious' (p 56).

Max Headroom on this account is a paradox – a sort of referential Hamlet who means and does not mean at the same time. However, as a creature of the 'abyss', he shows, even in Berko's reading, a powerful ambition to don the mantle of reference. On the one hand, he is 'the site upon which the codes of simulation have been able to produce by dint of being "more real than the real itself", the absolute image of the process of consumption' (p 51). On the other *hands*, he is a co-present switching centre in a regime that condemns the human body to a superfluous uselessness, eliminating the distinction between interiority and exteriority and precipitating the viewer into the eternity of the present or co-present, as well as representing the challenge of nomadic subjectivity to such inscriptural effects (pp 56-59).

As a simulation, therefore, it seems that Max is less of a being beyond meaning, than a being that carries the burden of overdetermination, the baggage of many possible meanings. Part of the problem rests in Berko's attempts to synthesise disparate and ultimately unreconcilable theorisations of the status of the referent or the real (such as Baudrillard's or Grossberg's). But it is also a product of a misreading of the trend of development in computer generated imagery.²³ Within the field of computer graphics, two broad trends can be discerned: computer modelling and computer animation. Of these it is the latter that concerns us here and in terms of interest is currently the area receiving extensive professional attention. Thus, for example, one report from Siggraph 87, 'the world's major computer graphics event', observes:

'The whole show's been hijacked by the animators' said one disgruntled image processing/earth resources PhD. 'With a fraction of their budget we could map the whole of Bangladesh and save a million beings from starvation'.²⁴

²² Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper-Reality*, London, Picador, 1986, p 7.

²³ I hope the following remarks establish the need for semiotic theory to address the technical details of computer animation. For good general discussion, though all texts in this rapidly expanding area have a limited shelf life, see P Sorenson, 'Computer Imaging, An Apple for Dreamsmiths', *Cinefex* no 6, pp 4-29; A Jankel and R Morton, *Creative Computer Graphics*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

²⁴ Cadcam International, 'A Search for Solid Dreams', pp 38-39, October 1987. The same impulse was in evidence in 1988, see *Computer Images International*, October, 1988, p 36.

²⁵ See Electronic Image Brochure and Doris Showreel – I am grateful to E I for allowing me to see this. See also *Television Week*, 'Graphic Show in Monaco', December 8-14, 1988, p 23.

²⁶ *Scientific American*, vol 257, October 1987, p 82 ff.

The project underlying computer animation is a familiar one – illusionism. In this field, it takes the form of an effort to produce: (a) images, (initially two-dimensional and later three-dimensional) of beings, objects or environments as they appear in natural perception (realism); (b) images that conform to the parameters of natural perception as mediated by lens-generated media (photo realism); (c) images of objects or beings that cannot be perceived in a state of resolution or degree of detail outside of the confines of the computer display (hyper-realism); and (d) images of objects that have no independent existence and cannot be perceived outside the computer display or images of conventional objects that behave in ways unknown to conventional perception (surrealism).

As a cursory study of computer graphics on television indicates, these various modes of realism overlap – surreal environments and photo-realistic objects interacting in multi-media applications of lens-generated images, traditional animation and computer graphics, e.g. in the titles for Independent Television's recent series, *Poirot*. Similarly, developments of specific techniques based on the use of super-computers – advanced texture mapping, ray and reflection tracing, fractal techniques, particle systems – aim in various ways to increase the apparent texture and mass of computer-generated imagery.²⁵ Such techniques for increasing the *iconic* capacity of computer-generated signifiers can be contrasted with *symbolic* or more conventionalist uses such as modelling, mapping and the construction of non-Baudrillardian simulations – artificial realities that model the structure of the 'real' without attempting to fabricate its substance by coding procedures based on strict resemblance. Though even here the use of realistic visual imagery is not a technological so much as a pragmatic constraint: how 'real' does a display have to look to be manipulable? Again, despite the fact that computer-generated imagery only has existence within the confines of the system, indexical uses can also be identified. Users may interact (in real time) with a simulated environment, e.g. matte generators, or the computer images can be generated by translating the physical movements of a dancer or a gloved hand into electrical signals inscribed on the screen.²⁶

The point about identifying these uses, which in themselves are often combined, is to suggest that the Saussurean contrast between the signifier and the signified is insufficiently nuanced to describe the variable relationships of iconism, indexicality and conventionalism (symbolism) that pertain in the constitution of computer-generated signifiers. Certainly one needs to refine the Piercean trichotomy further. But one probable development, that the notion of resemblance or motivation is determined in the last instance by collective conventionalism – the cultural frameworks in which it inheres – will not save the claim that computer-generated images are Baudrillardian simulations. On the contrary, such images are profoundly implicated in relations of reference.

It seems likely that Berko's view that computer simulation 'breaks

with the real' is based on a confusion between the non-representational technical computing codes that produce an image (usually a series of digitally-based instructions and computations) and the codes of resemblance that govern the image itself. In other words, she confuses the code and the message. In general there seems to be an inverse relationship between the complexity of the technical codes and the stereotypical literalness of the realised image, early efforts at computer animation of human figures in particular relying on well-established personae like Marilyn Monroe for recognition, in order to mask the incompleteness of the image.²⁷ But even given perfect visualisation the problem of producing credible, i.e. centred, characterisations with motivational depth remains. To this extent traditional animation methods as developed in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* remain more effective both in terms of cost and 'realistic' impact, though such images, because of their incompleteness, are similarly stereotyped.²⁸

Back to Max

The foregoing considerations suggest that Max Headroom need not vacate his much-publicised role as a signifier of collective destiny. He is a representation. Berko is certainly not unaware of this possibility:

... the representation upon which Max Headroom's simulated image bases itself upon [sic] is itself [sic] a representation of a simulation. Max is actually an actor made up and filmed to look like a simulation. (p 52)

But her desire to valorise her observations through Baudrillard leads her to treat Max – as indeed the general public were so invited in the pre-publicity – as a simulation. What then does Max represent? At a technological level Max represents the current underdevelopment of computer animation techniques, which in part reflects the costs involved. Computer animation is well-advanced in the production of images of inanimate objects and environments, but the sheer complexity of producing 'realistic' live action, given that this is the goal, remains a major stumbling block. Certainly the thrust of the research is towards the production, via the use of super computers, of full-length features with computer-generated characters (short features have been achieved some time ago, e.g. *The Works*), but this remains an aim rather than a realised objective.²⁹ Such a negative constraint, however, only indicates why the cybernetic project behind Max cannot be realised solely by computer animation; it does not tell us what he represents as such.

Considerations of this kind return us to the terrain established by previous writers' work on the meaning of the cyborg. Most of the writers I have cited – Haraway, Sobchack, Nichols – see a dialectic of control and resistance as central to the cyborg phenomenon. *Inter alia*, Berko continues this theme by suggesting that Max represents the completion

²⁷ On the phenomenon of overcoding see Umberto Eco, *Theory of Semiotics*, op cit, p 235.

²⁸ *Television Week*, vol 1, issue 11, 1988, pp 16-17.

²⁹ J Haler, 'Intelligence Tests', *Computer Images International*, pp 24-25. The sheer complexity of human figure animation is daunting: see K Waters, 'A Muscle Model for Animating Three Dimensional Facial Expressions', *Computer Graphics*, vol 21, no 4, July 1987. For general discussion see D Hebditch and N Anning, 'Computers Paint a New World', *New Scientist*, January 22, 1987, pp 33-36; 'The Works', *Cinefantastique*, vol 11 no 4, December 1981, pp 22-23.

³⁰ Lawrence Grossberg, 'The In-Difference of Television', *Screen* Spring 1987, vol 28 no 2, pp 38-39. Berko misquotes Grossberg inserting a 'not' between 'it' and 'does'.

of the project identified by Michel Foucault as the domestication of the human body, its docile and passive incorporation into the social body. (It is by no means clear that this interpretation is warranted. Foucault emphasises the opposition between concrete and discursive bodies. Max represents the discursive inscription of Carter, not the moment of corporeal subordination to the social body which clearly predates Max's entry onto the scene.) Such an incorporation is signalled by the fact that Max is a creature of cognitive science; but, she argues, it is also challenged by the fact that Max, in his non-narrative interactive mode, offers the spectacle of the mobile decentred subject beyond subjection:

Is Max Headroom the creation of an ahistorical, decontextualised cybernetic myth, the image of the subjected subject, or simply a subject who refused to be subjected. (p 59)

Consequently Max is conceived as hovering between a state of decentred/schizophrenic and nomadic subjectivity. Of the latter concept, Grossberg writes:

Nomadic subjectivity describes a post-humanist theory of the subject. Rejecting the existential subject who has a single unified identity that somehow exists in the same way in every practice, it proposes a subject that is constantly remade, reshaped as a mobile simulated set of vectors in a fluid context. But also rejecting the post-structural deconstruction of the subject into a fractured, fragmented and ad hoc discursive production, it proposes that it does matter who is acting and from where, that the subject is the site of a struggle, an ongoing articulation with its own history.³⁰

The incommensurability of these theorisations is glaring. Grossberg's account, which I endorse, is concerned to identify the extra-discursive individual – Berko forgets that the subject is not the individual – who inheres outside the operations of any particular discourse because: (a) the discursive or the ideological is not coterminous with or does not exhaustively define the social, which includes a range of concrete practices and experiences as well as discourse; (b) any given individual is complexly and contradictorily implicated in a range of discursive practices. Max Headroom by contrast is entirely a being that inheres, like cyborgs generally, within the confines of a discursive field; even Max's 'interactive' mode is mediated, i.e. pre-edited or, in the case of live interviews, post-edited. At best Berko confuses what Max might mean or inscribe as a semiotic function with what the viewer might read out from such a function in the act of consumption. If Max Headroom were the nomadic subject, he would be a representation of that subject, embodied in a representational field and only pseudo-nomadic. Grossberg's point is that consumers are *concretely* nomads.

Against this conceptualisation I would argue for the view that Max is a representation of the post-modern subject. But the issue is to define this subject's 'political unconscious' and chart in the formal characteristics

of Max's representation of it, the contours of its location in a definite social formation and set of collective practices.

A number of writers have provided a means to characterise the 'sensitivity' of this subject as arising from changes in the class structure of late capitalism, specifically the emergence of a cultural petite bourgeoisie, whose experiences and life chances summate the cultural horizons of the new professional middle class (PMC). As regards the latter, which supplies both the producers and consumers of post-modern cultural artefacts, it has the following features:

- (a) The PMC, under this definition, is demographically discrete – its members are postwar 'baby boomers' who experienced upward social mobility via education or, failing that, whose position on the labour market rests on qualification and/or the production of 'ideas'.
- (b) The PMC is the generation that has experience the full force of what Raymond Williams has called 'mobile privatisation'³¹ – the restriction of family life to the orbit of the self-contained 'nuclear' family and, relatedly, the prioritisation of television as the primary site for the mediation of collective life and the comprehension of the social imaginary. In particular, the PMC has experienced the evolution of television from a state of dependency on previously existing media forms, what Eco calls paleo-television, towards self-referential forms that exploit and play upon the evolved forms of television itself – 'neo-television talks about itself and about the contacts it establishes with its own public'.³²
- (c) The PMC is implicated in forms of work that combine the adherence to bureaucratised rules, or at least norms, imposed by the client with notions of professional autonomy and a no less emphatic, if less structured, responsiveness to peer group pressure – 'an almost guild like sense of individual autonomy and ability within the more or less horizontally perceived company of one's peers'.³³

The conflict between bureaucratism which seems at best arbitrary, at worst random, and individualism is often enhanced, particularly among employees in the media and communications industry (as opposed to state employees) with a pattern of work, e.g. freelancing, networking, that prioritises creativity within the context of pre-given ends, e.g. the advertising campaign, or investigative reportage which adheres to the norms of the profession while offering, none the less, a personal view. Hence the tendency of the PMC to engage in symbolic rehabilitation projects which valorise its individuality by discovering new significance in the already well-known and at the same time demonstrating its 'post auratic' distance from established tastes, e.g. elite and mass culture, by entrepreneurially recombining objects in 'new' settings. Such a strategy combines a plausible conformity to the well-established with the chance to shock the tastes of other social groups and formations.

The contours of a post-modern sensibility – the perception of the arbitrariness of codes, the emphasis on manipulating cultural forms and contents (pastiche, parody) and the corresponding emphasis on simultaneity and the evacuation of history – can be discerned in this specifica-

³¹ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London, Fontana, 1974.

³² Umberto Eco, 'A Guide to the Neo-Television of the 80s', *Framework* no 25, 1984, pp 18-27.

³³ Fred Pfiel, 'Making Flippy-Floppy', in Mike Davis et al (eds), *The Year Left*, London, Verso, 1985, pp 268-295.

³⁴ S Lasch and J Urry, *The End of Organised Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity, 1987, pp 285-300. See also P Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Taste*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1984; Angela McRobbie, 'Post-Modernism and Popular Culture', ICA Documents 4, 1986, pp 54-58.

tion with the key advantage that such qualities are argued to have a specific social base. (As opposed to a general social base as in Fredric Jameson's epochal account.) One might go further and suggest that such a sensibility (if generationally diffused) is concretised and rendered pragmatic for those individuals whose education – in art schools and, in the polytechnic sector, in cultural and media studies – and current or future employment prospects rest on the application of cultural and art historical knowledge to production *per se*.³⁴

As a narratively embedded character, Max replays some of the more obvious features of PMC experience: literally and figuratively a creature of neo-television, he is also a fictive functionary of one of its aboriginal formats – investigative TV reportage – helping Carter to 'tell the truth the others won't tell' on Channel 23. Again, Max personifies the principle of networking *per se* – 'one memory, two minds' – as he mediates between the external world, via a video lens occupying the same point of view as Carter or, like Hal in Kubrick's *2001*, through independent scanning, and those accessing the system, e.g. Carter and Theora (Amanda Pays). In his chat-show host mode, Max embodies interactive working *per se*, becoming a veritable summation of the interactive possibilities within and with the screen. To take one example, 'Max Headroom's Giant Christmas Turkey' contains the following kinds of viewer-screen positionalities: interviews with celebrities, e.g. Bob Geldof, in long to medium shot entailing monitor to face interaction; direct talking head (or parasocial) interaction from the screen to the viewer, either against a computer-generated or lens-generated background; monitor to monitor interaction – Max 'talking' to another Max, Max talking to a celebrity (e.g. Robin Williams by satellite); monitor to environment interaction – Max apparently playing a piano while singing, Max engaging in vox pop 'interviews' on the street with 'ordinary' children.

This virtuoso exploration of positionalities and sight lines – not absent from Max's narrative mode and intertwined therein with conventional point of view and omniscient viewer shots – is a visualisation of networking, which doubles the viewer's work in reading the text as it evolves. Yet such a virtuoso display operates within tightly defined parameters – 'Giant Christmas Turkey' is innovative in form, at the level of visual coding and continuity, but as banal and mawkish at the level of content as anyone might wish a Christmas special to be. The plot lines of ABC's *Max Headroom* are conventional cyberpunk action adventures, even if flawed by the fact that the putative hero, centre of the action and the show's prime novelty – Max – is a disembodied talking head who relies on others to supply the action and issue the commands. Even Max's alter ego, Carter shows a similar reliance:

One of the show's ironies is that Carter and Max . . . are equally artificial. Himself a master of all the TV reporter's glib phrases and affected mannerisms, Edison Carter relies on the computer-hacking skills of his controller,

Theora Jones [Amanda Pays] to gain access to information he needs for his exposes.³⁵

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³⁵ *Cinefantastique*, vol 18
p 58.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Time Out*, August 27-
September 2 1986,
pp 18-19.

As a hero, Max displays the extent to which heroism is itself a show staged by others, which pays tribute not to his activism – Max does very little; he mainly comments on what others do – but to the support staff who make such activism possible. Regarding Max's iconoclasm, like the bureaucratic employee or the freelancer working to a closely-defined brief, Max is subject to a set of abstract rules and encoding procedures to which he conforms, even as he derides. Max's innovativeness is confined to wisecracks about the inevitable or to wandering over Carter's memory bank ironing out discrepancies with the quiet frenzy of a police functionary.

If the foregoing textual features establish that Max has a 'topic' resonance with the basic condition of existence of the professional middle class, this conclusion is reinforced by the views of the cultural wing of that class, particularly by those whose interventions bring Max into being. In the case of ABC's *Max Headroom Show*:

It is precisely MAX's potential 'to be subversive' that most interests SF writer John Shirley, one of the earliest and most successful of the cyberpunk writers. 'I think it's the most interesting thing on network TV... if you can get ten minutes of radical information out of a sixty-minute show, that justifies the whole thing'.

On the other hand Michael Cassutt, executive script consultant who brings 'a certain inside perspective on TV politics', feels: 'In my own small way, I've tried to turn MAX into M&M TV – brain candy.'³⁶ The dialectic of iconoclasm and insider 'realism' identified here seems like freeze dried radicalism when set against the originators' intentions:

It was never our intention to make a multifaceted perfect personality that was going to appeal to kids and mums alike... he is supposed to be a comment on life: vitriolic and hard. Basically, he is a very right wing person postulating a lot of left wing stuff to highlight how manipulative a talking head on TV can be. We wanted to show how you can put any sort of message across if you wrap it up in a very seductive, cosmetic image. It's not entirely an accident that he looks like something out of Nazi Germany.

Yet such a radical project is not quite as antithetical to Max's accommodation to the 'mainstream' as it might seem since such a use was envisaged from the start. 'We wanted to hang on to the subversive element', says Rocky Morton. 'The commercials we did for Radio Rentals were really taking the mickey out of advertising.'³⁷

Max emerges from these considerations as the bearer of the burden of the cultural petite bourgeoisie, constrained to sustain its role as a source of innovation and rule-breaking within the terms of production established by the hegemony of international media capitalism, particularly

³⁸ Michelle Mattelart, 'Can Industrial Culture be a Culture of Difference?' in L. Grossberg and C. Nelson (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London, Macmillan, 1988, pp 429-445.

³⁹ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, London, Methuen, 1987, p 252.

⁴⁰ J Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, pp 188-89.

the US media. In general, the terms of production in contemporary conditions takes as its aesthetic principle an echoic play on the codes and formats of the image memory bank of Hollywood and its satellites:

*It is as though the process of commercial concentration within the industry itself, evidenced by the rise of conglomerates, had somehow entailed a similar concentration in the area of the symbolic. The creation of derivative and multi-media products is a function of the same movement: the popular TV film is a spin-off of a popular movie; the plaything or the phonograph record continually re-awakens a chain of association, definitively blurring the division between infrastructure and superstructure in a vast syndrome of repetition.*³⁸

Clearly such a play on the already-read and the already-coded can have a demystificatory function. As John Fiske points out, the chat show Max, as opposed to his narrative persona, foregrounds the constructed quality of the television image, subverting the illusion of transparency.³⁹ With regard to Max's initial impact, this is a valuable observation. But such foregrounding, in any case a necessarily marginal aspect of Max's narrative deployment, becomes, through its repetitive and ceaseless posing of the enigmas of self-reference, a heroism of insiderism – what is being played upon or parodied here, how far can the chain of allusion be stretched? The emergent competition over allusion and play offers a concrete demonstration of 'post-auratic' connoisseurship and typifies the cultural petite bourgeoisie's strategy for competitively valorising its services on the cultural labour market. Max provides, in his playful exploration of the codes, formulas and genres of film and television, a providential combination of rule-breaking and conformity within the property relationships and legal constraints on the superannuated social imaginary of media capitalism.

Such 'playfulness' considered as a formal mechanism is less a rupture of the limits of the text in which it occurs than a celebration of textuality *per se*. What Max models in his being is the capacity of a chain of signifiers to absorb and transcend its own or any other texts' semantic history – a history of meaning which is also a struggle over meaning. Max's capacity to achieve this transcendence rests upon his putative primary status as a signifier of cybernetic being. As suggested above, such a mode of being inheres in a series of programmed reactions to external stimuli within the parameters of a fixed system, however interactive and dialogic these reactions may seem.⁴⁰ In so far as Max is a representation of a cyborg, rather than a cybernetic being *per se*, his semiotic function is to re-describe, like other fictive cyborgs, the principle of systematic control as an existential statement emerging from the particulars of a concrete personality. Like other cyborgs, Max 'incarnates' as a lived reality the principle of cybernetic systems that variation in the parts is consistent with maintaining the integrity of the whole. As such, Max's delinquent personality is not the incursion of carnival so much as a carnivalesque

gloss – a playfulness with codes that valorises the capacity of neo-television to sustain itself through self-reflexivity.

Viewed from this perspective, Max Headroom presages the power of the electronic media to produce, via a synergy of developments such as high definition television and computer animation, signifiers that subordinate their referents in the external world. The image of the technological semantic fix that Max, like all cyborgs, evokes, eulogises the triumph of the signifier, its purging of all relations of reference that are not subtended by the 'authority' of the text, its capacity to impose a univocal meaning on the sign, to frame all meaning in its own meta-language.

The most obvious indicator of the integrative potential of this shift in the technological base of image production is to be found in the implications of computer animation for the actor. Such an implication was, indeed, highlighted in the publicity for the first appearance of Max on British television: a representative from Equity, the British Actors' Association, appeared on Channel Four in an April Fools' Day spoof to debate the future of actor employment. In the short term at least, the imperfections of the labour market for actors are far more likely to undermine the chances for work than computer animation. If any technology poses an immediate threat, it will be satellite delivery of imported product and repeated materials.

It is true, however, that all forms of animation – from cartoons through claymation to computer animation – have the effect of reducing the number of actors required to construct character-centred action, though they may increase the demand for technical staff. The cinema has long established the use of metaphorical and metonymic devices as substitutes for character and such substitutes often play on the indices of presence in real life – close-ups of personal property, portraits, letters, voice-overs in interior monologues, etc. But computer animation (or, for that matter, cartoons), even if operating such conventions, compound this process of substitution by rendering character itself as an intrinsic textual event as opposed to textually recoded performance. From the perspective of the politics of performance⁴¹ the range of variation – of voice, gesture, posture and dress – that an actor may deploy to re-code a character is rendered by computer animation as an absolute function of the text. If the text is 'progressive' then the recuperation of the performance element will be progressive. But the potential for a negative dialectic between the totality of the text and the particularity of the performance is obliterated. On the other hand, where the use of computer animation and related techniques have been maximised, notably in the rock video, the entire ensemble of effects, the very texture of what is seen, its sometimes stunning complexity, is deployed as a means of adding aesthetic value to the *persona* of the star – a differently articulated but parallel erasure of the potential for contradiction between the totality of the text and its discursive elements.

What is evident in the computer generated imagery currently avail-

⁴¹ Andrew Higson 'Film Acting and Independent Cinema, *Screen* May-August 1986, vol 27, no 3-4, pp 110-132.

⁴² Roland Barthes,
Empire of the Sign,
London, Cape, 1973,
p 7.

⁴³ *The Guardian*,
January 5, 1989, p 25.

able – its piecemeal deployment – is that such imagery merely adds to the contradictory texture of the diegesis by multiplying the number of discursive elements on which illusionism is based. (It may be for this reason, coupled with the relative incompleteness of the computer image mentioned above, that computer imagery is neutralised by heavy stereotyping.) If fragments of computer animation merely increase the multi-acculturality of the text, the fully-realised, photo-realistic text will offer by comparison a powerfully-integrated unification. The sphere of iconicity, so variably textured and discursively fractured, will be reduced to an iconic variant of writing. One may speak of this as an *ideography* analogous to Japanese writing, but it is important to emphasise this cultural difference: in Japan fictional creations are regarded as inanimate and do not carry the alibi of the ‘real’.⁴² Fully-realised computer animation, when it arrives, will maximise the illusion of reference while increasing the control of those who ‘write’. Such a possibility may indeed be closer than is generally recognised. The world market for computer graphics applications in film and television was estimated as 400 million dollars in 1988, and over the coming two years is expected to grow by a third.⁴³

The pleasure of the computer-generated text – its luminous, seamless coherence – is a pleasure of manipulation, of causing markers of the ‘real’, which are themselves intrinsically generated, to respond in ways that were hitherto impracticable – owls that fly to order across the screen, moons that rise over imaginary landscapes, etc. The tendency of such imagery to exceed the constraints of natural perception, even as it perfects illusionism, will in turn tend to subordinate the viewer to the text as the only site of such experiences.

The burden of Max Headroom is to mask this Utopia of the signifier, to suggest by his restive radical chic that those who oversee the production of cybernetic entertainments are ruled by their own creations and, by extension, those who consume them. Giving such a process, literally, a human face, he reflects the perspective of the middle man who knows the codes and the metalanguages that produce the new social imaginary – an imaginary in which all being and meaning is reduced to its pre-ordained function. Replaying the myth of the cyborg, Max filters this reduction through the glittering grid of media insiderism, glamorising the world of the in-joke and the well-informed consumer of the image bank of neo-television. Cynical and professional by turn, he manifests the survival tactics of the cultural petite bourgeoisie: to make an art out of subordination. *Same as it ever was.*

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BIENNIAL REPORT

SUSAN BOYD-BOWMAN REVIEWS THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL TELEVISION STUDIES CONFERENCE

The left hand of the British Film Institute didn't know what the right was doing last summer: one cadre unwittingly organised the Eisenstein anniversary conference at Keble College, Oxford to clash with another cadre's International Television Studies Conference (the third biennial ITSC) at the University of London's Institute of Education. The Eisenstein folk at Oxford had visiting Soviet film-makers, an exhibition, an extended season of films at the National Film Theatre, London and an Eisenstein retrospective on BBC 2, plus two major TV documentaries, to keep their subject warm. Those of us who chose against Eisenstein had to content ourselves weaving through five strands of nearly 100 academic papers in the concrete vaults of the Institute. The cast was much the same as ITSC 1984 and 1986: North American and European (but not French) and a handful of Third World academics (some of whom were on a conference circuit of *Small World* scale). Some broadcasting research institutions (including the IBA) contributed papers, and there were even a couple of educational TV executives (from TV Globo in Brazil, for example), but participants could not but have been acutely aware of the indifference of television institutions to their colloquia on the eve of a broadcasting revolution in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The political malaise and a sense of *déjà entendu* were manifest in wholesale critiques of their object of study. A sense of stagnation was exacerbated by the belated appearance of the anthology of the previous ITSC on the conference bookstall.¹ Policy-makers have passed us by.

The five strands were much the same as last time: TV Audience, Identities, Texts and

History, Politics and Power, and (new this year) the European market. Raymond Williams, who had been co-president with Hilde Himmelweit until his death last year, was replaced as keynote speaker by Stuart Hall, whose address merited a squib in the quality papers for its denunciation of the government's deregulatory policies ('Britain's own soap opera'). His analysis of the contradictions between deregulation and centralisation ('the era of Maxwell and Murdoch, with Rees-Mogg guarding their standards while they are in orbit together') proved prescient of the White Paper four months later. But, while noting some shifts in the problematics of the conference strands, his main point was that the academy could be strategic but is in fact marginal to the major decisions made about television in society. No one is listening to us except ourselves, and the lack of morale at ITSC was palpable.

The plenary session on the final day was chaired by outgoing BFI director Anthony Smith, and featured Hilde Himmelweit, who prioritised media research as: (1) young people and the inner city; (2) longitudinal viewing profiles; (3) textual analysis; (4) examination of decision-making processes among broadcasters; (5) theories about TV's role in society; and (6) the address of a wider public by TV researchers. George Gerbner's presentation elicited some aggressive questions from Len Masterman as to whether Gerbner actually enjoyed television as

¹ Phillip Drummond and Richard Paterson (eds), *Television and its Audience: International Research Perspectives*, London, British Film Institute, 1988.

opposed to regarding it as a prime agent of social conditioning; Gerbner replied with the dictum that in order to be a good doctor one didn't need to catch every disease. This was the only occasion to my knowledge that an issue which had provoked discussion at previous ITSCs was raised: the degree to which television researchers may be handicapped by their own guilty pleasures.

The ninety papers on the smorgasbord were more heterogeneous in approach and variable in quality than one might have supposed from the selection procedure, with invitations being based on abstracts. Some of the better offerings were whisked away by their authors, presumably for publication elsewhere. The 'Texts' strand (which has been symptomatically absolved from suspicions of formalism by being hinged to 'and History') had some peculiar bed-fellows, even allowing for the strand organisers' problems in finding accommodation on the platforms for a heterogeneous collection. Christine Gledhill elaborated her thesis that the gender specificity of melodrama as female is a twentieth-century phenomenon, and that melodrama and soap opera are significantly different in their narratives, address, relation to realism, and historical and institutional formations. Her work crosses boundaries between nineteenth-century domestic fiction, radio serials, the woman's film of the 1930s, and the transition from daytime to prime-time soap opera, and demonstrated a broad cultural studies approach lacking from almost all other papers, which homed in on particular TV series or common subject matter. On the same platform, for example, was a paper on *Magnum, p.i.* and its discourse of class, charmingly titled, after a quote from its bible for serial writers, 'Champagne Taste on a Beer Budget'. If Mary Beth Haralovich was aware of Sandy Flitterman's paper on sexuality in the same series, 'Thighs and Whiskers', from four years ago (and reprinted in *Screen*²), she gave no indication of it, and any chance of taking up her points about nationalism and populism was vitiated by a third (unrelated) paper which whisked us back to gender in the form of stereotyping on Indian TV.

Another unlikely assorted panel worked better, around the latent common factor of the phenomenology of unpleasure and anxiety. Patricia Mellencamp's psychoanalytic account of

television's coverage of catastrophe used examples ranging from baby Jessica trapped down a Texan well, to the *Challenger* disaster to illustrate how TV's compulsive repetition contains anxiety about trauma. Ageing, she remarked, is the embryonic form of catastrophe, and her successor on the panel, Hilary Radner, looked at how Cybill Shepherd as cover girl and TV star embodies the tropes of consumerism, loss and narcissistic identification for the female viewer watching her in TV adverts for L'Oréal hair colour or as Maddy in *Moonlighting*. Finally, there was Claus-Dieter Rath's idiosyncratic disquisition on autobiographical moments on TV, when the subject becomes an author of his/her own case history in either a quasi-therapeutic setting, or by means of a 'video epitaph'.

The next day, the Scandinavians brought us back to melancholia and consumption, in the form of a panel on *Miami Vice* and postmodernism³, much to the annoyance of Anglo colonisers of this territory last time around.⁴ In the prior session on music video, Andrew Goodwin quoted Simon Frith as saying that the videos are more heavily theorised than the music itself, before going on to propose a tripartite analysis which would examine the soundtrack (particularly the form of closure in the musical narrative), its relation to the visual imagery, and finally the relation to stardom and the music industry.

A new theme was television's own history, which yoked together two interesting North American papers – on the quiz show scandal of the 1950s by William Boddy, and on television's memory of its own origins in the form of syndicated repeats of vintage series (now the staple of the Nickelodeon cable channel in the US), presented by James Hay – with a British account of the history of video from Roy Armes. A better match would have been an earlier paper in this strand on 1950s documentary television

² Sandy Flitterman, 'Thighs and Whiskers – the Fascination of "Magnum, p.i."', *Screen* March-April 1985, vol 26 no 2, pp 42-58.

³ Torben Kragh Grodal, '"Miami Vice", Melancholia and Postmodernity'.

⁴ See Philip Hayward's review in 'Spheres of Interest and Sites of Struggle,' in *Mediamatic (The European Art & Media Magazine)* vol 3 no 1, September 1988, pp 28-30.

from John Corner, which focused on an Associated Television series *Look in on London*; the clip he showed to illustrate the ethnographic discourse of the series was an enacted encounter between the presenter and a street-cleaner. (Comparatively few of the paper-givers chose to sacrifice part of their allotted twenty minutes' presentation time to showing extracts, which contributed to the general aridity of the proceedings.) But Corner's paper was in a shotgun marriage with Frances Bonner's on dystopian TV fiction – on the vapid logic of past versus present.

The audience research strand seems to have smartened up its methodology since ITSC '86. The Scandinavians are doing a lot of textual analysis combined with qualitative audience study in relation to imported American serials like *Dynasty*. Jostein Gripsrud of the University of Bergen in Norway, for example, offered a critique of reception studies (specifically their apologetic tone) in the context of examining the determinations of *Dynasty* in a country which had never seen an open-ended serial before, but which was saturated with a publicity and distribution apparatus which established the narrative image of the series (sold for a mere 1500 dollars per episode), such that viewers in Bergen were claiming in interview that they knew people similar to those in Denver – even if they denied knowledge of comparable problems in their own lives! Kim Schröder of Roskilde University in Denmark has also been conducting a longitudinal study of *Dynasty*; he wished to reintroduce the concept of quality into discussion of popular television. His model (derived from Bourdieu's analysis of taste in *Distinction*⁵ and Leslie Fiedler's writings) used three dimensions: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the ecstatic; on the basis of all three, *Dynasty* might be perceived as quality TV by sectors of the audience. These papers produced a lively debate, chaired by Martin Barker, who concurred that notions of cultural value were back on the agenda of television studies.

But there were egregious problems with more empirically-based papers like the one comparing audience readings of *Dallas* and West Germany's answer to it, *Black Forest Clinic*. A complicated factor analysis of oral interviews seemed to indicate that while audiences shared motivations

in watching the two series, the gratifications offered were quite different, with *Clinic* offering pleasures of community, justice and morality, while *Dallas* offered violence, complicated plots and escapist entertainment. Both series were perceived as realistic, and gender made little difference. British spectators who had followed the multi-coloured graphs on the overhead projection presentation took the two speakers to task for their uncertain methodology.

Compared to earlier ITSCs, the most steam seems to have gone out of the Politics strand, with very few analyses of the political economy, and many more microcosmic studies. The new mood of Realpolitik was epitomised in the paper on 'Higher Education, Training and the Culture Industries: A Working Partnership' by Ian Connell and Geoff Hurd, two apostates from left-wing politics arguing for the reorientation of media education away from critical theory and toward employment prospects. Replace semiotics with management training skills. It doesn't matter what girl number twenty knows about ideology (to paraphrase Judith Williamson's controversial article in *Screen Education* a few years ago⁶); what does she know about editing high-band video?

Lawrence Grossberg's eagerly-awaited paper on 'History and Reconstruction of the Television Apparatus' was cast aside in favour of the speaker's off-the-cuff diagnosis of the crisis in popular culture studies. He disputed the notion that there was such a thing as 'television studies'. The attempt to stake out a discipline had failed, and some form of reception theory (which addressed affective as well as cognitive responses) was required to bring us back to the issue of hegemonic struggles, to the discrimination of forms which can be oppositional. The publication of Alan Bloom's book⁷ had chillingly reminded North American scholars that liberalism and youth culture were under attack, and that the discourse of post-modernism was

⁶ Judith Williamson, 'How Does Girl Number Twenty Understand Ideology?', *Screen Education* Autumn/Winter 1981/82, no 40, pp 80-87.

⁷ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1987.

and that the discourse of post-modernism was being articulated to political conservatism. Grossberg's slogan was the need 'to take talk for a walk', and Angela McRobbie's remark was picked up by chairperson Paul Willemen, who wanted talk to walk in the right direction, and reminded the music culture enthusiasts that the

'downside' of youth was its lack of cognitive skills. Participants in the third ITSC, even if they regarded film studies as a 'negative model' of what their own terrain of study and its political effectivity might be, might well feel nostalgic for the triumphalism of the Eisenstein reassessment taking place at Keble.

ENUNCIATION AND COMEDY: 'KIND HEARTS AND CORONETS'

BY JERRY PALMER

¹ M Douglas, 'The Social Control of Cognition: Some Factors in Joke Perception', *Man* (third series), vol 3, 1968, pp 361-76.

² The censorship of comedy is not well-studied, especially as much of it is no doubt self-censorship, but there is a brief analysis of the difficulties of the Josser comedies, starring music-hall comedian Ernie Lotringa, in T Aldgate, 'British Cinema in the 1930s', *Popular Culture: Historical Development of Popular Culture in Britain* (2), Open University Press, 1981. See also the brief comments on the fate of the Weimar cabaretiers after 1933 in L Appignanesi, *Cabaret*, London, Methuen, 1984, pp 153-59.

IT IS A COMMONPLACE of recent film criticism that any reading of a film text which does not, minimally, take into account the positioning of the spectator in the process of enunciation is deficient in some way (the maximalist position is to base reading exclusively on this mechanism). Nowhere is this caveat more pertinent than in the case of comedy, for comedy is incomprehensible in the absence of reference to the level of enunciation. This should not be taken to mean that a reading based on such positioning constitutes the meaning of the text: at best it would be a way of establishing a 'preferred reading'; here, too, comedy is a privileged instance because of the well-known difficulty of theorising comic failure.

The relevance of enunciation is most easily demonstrated sociologically. The decision to make a joke implies the judgment that the set of circumstances pertaining is appropriate for levity on such-and-such a subject: as Mary Douglas pointed out, a joke must be permitted as well as understood in order to constitute a joke, for in the absence of such permission it will be categorised as something else, such as childishness or offensiveness.¹ In situations where social interaction is mediated through a text, in one or other of the cultural apparatuses – e.g. a cinema – the relevance of such considerations is veiled by the nature of the institution in question. Cinema is an entertainment, as such it has a specified place in the social structure, and comedy is a form of entertainment; therefore no one questions the relevance or permissibility of making jokes under these circumstances. However, even here the theme of the jokes may still be subject to normative judgment: obscene jokes may still be regarded as unsuitable for film, satirical jokes aimed at particular personalities may be judged potentially or actually libellous and excluded, and so on.² This indicates that pragmatic (in the linguistic sense) judgments obtain as much here as in 'everyday' humour.

The relevance of enunciation is also visible in Freud's theory. Freud argues that jokes do not have a semantic mechanism which is distinctive (he calls it 'joke technique'), and that what does distinguish them is their

enunciative mechanism, in various ways. For example, he argues in a late paper³ that there is a distinctive distribution of enunciative roles in jokes: a joke teller, the butt of the joke, and a listener; in the absence of the listener we are in the presence of humour, not a joke, and it is the distribution of enunciative roles that is responsible for the distinction; these roles are enunciative in the sense that they are both social roles and inscribed in the statement. Second, he shows that in jokes various instincts are able to subvert the inhibitions that otherwise control their behavioural manifestations, and he argues that the way in which jokes protect these instincts against the relevant inhibitions is what constitutes the distinctive feature of the joke. Thus in two ways Freud argues that jokes are essentially to be understood in terms of their enunciative mechanism: both in the social distribution of roles and in the displacement of meaning from the semantic, or lexical level, to the articulation of the signifying chain in desire, the joke is constituted in the moment of enunciation.

I have shown elsewhere that there are major difficulties in the Freudian theory.⁴ Briefly, they are these:

(a) the feature of jokes which protects instincts from the control of inhibitions is in fact their semiotic structure; this has to be so, and in any event Freud himself admits it on the very same page of *Jokes* that he denies it. Thus the enunciative specificity of the joke must be doubled by a semantic specificity.

(b) the distribution of enunciative roles described by Freud is not in fact specific to jokes. In slander too, as a Greek essayist Lucian pointed out, there has to be a speaker, a listener, and a butt of the slander.⁵ The same is probably true of any polemic.

(c) even if the distribution of roles was distinctive, the problem would remain that there was not necessarily any other difference between humour and jokes, that they had a common semantic mechanism which was independent of the enunciative mechanism Freud analyses.

Despite these criticisms of the letter of Freud's text, there is no reason to reject the notion that jokes are constituted in enunciation: even if they have a semantic mechanism that is specific to them, and even if their enunciative mechanism is not unique, this does not mean that they lack an enunciative mechanism which is an integral element of their meaning structure. The relevance of their enunciative mechanism can be demonstrated by a consideration of their semantic structure: as Freud showed, in jokes there is indeed a speaker (which may be a collectively produced text, the instance of the narration), a butt (which may not be a person: it may be an institution, or even simply the structure of meaning itself, as in 'nonsense' humour or in puns), and an audience. Now these enunciative roles are both inside and outside the joke discourse: the speaker is both the actual biographical entity in question and the discursive instance of the narration; the butt is both what is ridiculed in the joke and also the extra-discursive entity in question; the audience is both the actual sociological and biographical entity and is inscribed in the text in the form of its mode of address.⁶

³ Sigmund Freud, 'Humour', London, Tavistock, *Standard Edition*, vol 21, 1960.

⁴ J Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd*, London, British Film Institute, 1987, pp 30-6; the relevant sections of Freud are *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Freud Library, 1976, especially part B, and 'Humour', op cit; see also the discussion in T Todorov, 'Freud sur l'Enonciation', in his *Théories du Symbole*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1976.

⁵ Lucian, 'Slander: On Not Being Quick to Put Faith in It', *Works*, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1, p 367ff.

⁶ This point is discussed at greater length in J Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd*, op cit, chapter 4.

⁷ See, for instance, BFI Dossier no 17, *Television Sitcom*, 1982; Mick Eaton, 'Laughter in the Dark', *Screen* 1981 vol 22 no 2, pp 21-28; Steve Neale, 'Psychoanalysis and Comedy', *Screen*, 1981 vol 22, no 2, pp 29-43. See also Claire Johnson and Paul Willemen (eds), *Frank Tashlin*, Edinburgh Film Festival *Screen*, 1973. The rhetorical power of comedy and humour is discussed at greater length at various points in J Palmer, *Logic of the Absurd*, op cit.

⁸ Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, London, Cameron and Taylor, 1977, especially chapter 7; J Richards and A Aldgate, *Best of British*, Basil Blackwell, 1983, chapter 8; J Ellis, 'Made in Ealing', *Screen*, Spring 1975, vol 16, no 1, pp 78-127.

⁹ George Orwell, 'The Art of Donald McGill', in *Collected Essays*, London, Heinemann, 1961.

For these reasons, therefore, it can be argued that comedy is enunciatively specific, and that – by implication – any interpretation of a comic text is obliged to take on board this specificity. Now in practice interpretations tend to discuss the butts of humour as if they were no different from the butts of 'serious' criticism, as if comic attack were indistinguishable from non-comic attack. This occurs especially where the more 'realistic' forms of comedy are concerned; say, TV 'sitcom' as opposed to Jerry Lewis or Laurel and Hardy, forms of comedy where the very structures of meaning are subverted, thus supposedly making such comedy into something potentially more of an ideological challenge than mere 'realist' comedy.⁷ The theory of enunciation suggests that this is unwise. The rest of this article is devoted to exploring the proposition that to start from the level of enunciation in comedy is indeed rewarding; the basis of the exploration is an example: *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (produced by Michael Balcon, directed by Robert Hamer, Ealing Studios, 1949).

Recent analyses of Ealing comedies, and of *Coronets* in particular, show a relatively homogeneous interpretation both of this film and of the Ealing style of comedy in general.⁸ Such comedy is a 'safe playing-out of "base urges": the enactment of desires that are not socially sanctioned' (Ellis, p 114), a 'safety valve for our more anti-social impulses' (Sir Michael Balcon, quoted in Richards and Aldgate, p 104). These urges and impulses are the 'aspirations and Utopian desires' of the lower middle classes (Ellis, p 115) or 'radical class resentments' (Barr, p 128), the 'shadowy desires and aspirations at the margins of bourgeois thought' (Ellis, p 117), specifically – in the case of *Coronets* – the aspiration for 'a different class status' (Ellis, p 116), for the victims of Louis' ambition 'are felt as obstacles in the way of him, and of all of us . . .' (Barr, p 128). In brief, such comedies are 'wish-fulfilment fantasies. . . . Who has not wanted to . . . commit mayhem on a fairly large scale to get rid of tiresome people in the way? (Balcon, in Richards and Aldgate, pp 102-4).

On what grounds are we to consider that the *comic* portrayal of these unacceptable desires acts as a safety-valve for them? Clearly it must be due to some feature of the comic process. The theory of comedy which makes it a safety valve is to be found in thinkers as diverse as George Orwell and Freud. For Orwell, comedy is the Sancho Panza side of our natures, a holiday from the demands of morality which will take us back refreshed to circumstances in which we are obliged to respond in terms of our Quixote side, refreshed and all the more willing to be dominated by the Don.⁹ For Freud, the semiotic mechanism of the joke enables instincts which are normally repressed to manifest themselves in behaviour. In each of these two theories, we are implicitly directed to consider what is specific to the semiotic mechanism in question: Orwell's theory only works if we take the metaphor of a holiday seriously, and what that metaphor must mean, when deconstructed, is that there is some feature of the semiotic mechanism involved which enables humour to perform

the function he ascribes to it. In Freud, the specificity of the semiotic mechanism is the locus of a curious aporia, where he both affirms and denies the pertinence of thinking the semiotic level as a specific entity.

Indeed, the political interpretation that Ellis proposes indicates that we should follow this line of enquiry. Ellis argues that in comedy the anti-social urges that are indulged must, at the end, be reconciled with the framework of 'the society which those desires are disrupting' (p 115); his example is the ending of *Some Like It Hot* (directed by Billy Wilder, 1959), where the 'scatological theme of homosexuality' is reconciled 'on a personal level only' by Jack Lemmon's 'fiancé' replying – to the revelation that his 'fiancée' is actually a man – 'Well, nobody's perfect'. Now, if such integration does occur at this point it is clearly because what the millionaire says is a joke, and not to be taken seriously as a proposition – first in the logical sense; thereafter, as a result, in the marital!

It is worth 'unpacking' the ending of *Some Like It Hot* in more detail, since it illustrates the kind of difficulty Freudian-inspired commentary on comedy can easily get into if the level of enunciation is elided. Ellis does not in fact say in what way the film incarnates homosexual desire as a scatological theme, but it is safe to assume it is in the form of the Jerry/Daphne (Jack Lemmon) – millionaire sub-plot, since here the millionaire desires Jerry despite his – to the audience – obvious 'unfemininity' and Jerry/Daphne at one point becomes 'confused' over whether he can marry the millionaire or not: all of these plot elements could be taken as an incarnation of scatology.

But we should notice two things. First, the presentation of these plot elements is calculated to make the behaviour in question ridiculous: Lemmon's exaggerated response to his engagement and his deliberate misunderstanding of Joe/Josephine's (Tony Curtis') objections to the situation produce laughter in the mechanism of their enunciation; therefore the plot element which incarnates the scatological element is doubled (if not totally 'reinterpreted') by the enunciative mechanism of comedy. Second, as a result, the 'reintegration' of the ending is not really necessary, since rendering the theme in the mode of the ridiculous has already done it for us; and anyway, as we have seen, the reintegration is inseparable from the final gag of the film.

Moreover, if we unpack the joke of the final line of dialogue, it is difficult to sustain Ellis' interpretation even where the ending is concerned. The humour of this line derives from the fact that 'Nobody's perfect' implies, in this context, that Jerry is basically suitable, but marred by some slight failing, in other words that being the wrong gender is only one marginal imperfection from a long list of other possible ones, and is no more important than any of them: wrong colour hair, likes canaries, squeezes the toothpaste from the middle of the tube, and so on. This joke is fairly typical of the jokes involving the millionaire, and what they add up to is a comic portrait, not of a homosexual, but of an obsessive: someone who is so obsessed by 'collecting showgirls', as he calls it, that



Some Like It Hot:
Daphne and her soon-
to-be fiancé

he doesn't notice, or care, about Jerry/Daphne's multifarious 'imperfections': ugliness, disinterest, size, face-slapping, all of which his obsession (with girls) leads him to interpret as playing hard to get. In short, he is ridiculous because an obsessive, and the audience laughs at him: it is difficult to see how this could be taken as a release from inhibitions repressing homosexual desire. In general, this seems consistent with the overall comic theme of the film: a series of misunderstandings and double meanings arising from the false appearance of gender reversal, where the continuous presupposition is precisely that the appearances are indeed misleading. In short, the definition of masculinity implied by the form of the jokes in *Some Like It Hot* is largely traditional: such non-traditional elements as there are derive largely from the fact that homosexuality (or transvestism) is presented as an acceptable subject for humour in public, in other words that the topic is no longer so suppressed that it is unavailable for humour in a public forum such as main-

stream Hollywood cinema, as opposed to the more restricted forum of dirty joke telling.

We must conclude that it is the semiotic nature of the comic process that is responsible for its capacity to act as a safety-valve. In practice, therefore, the question of using some plot device to reconcile the unavowable urges of comedy with the social framework is unnecessary: the semiotic mechanism of humour will take care of the problem for us.

The unavowable urge in question in *Coronets* is the aggressive desire to subjugate morality entirely to desire, to pursue ambitious ends – a dukedom, money, beautiful women – without heed to the means used. But what separates our attitude to these acts of murder from our attitude to other such acts is not primarily that we feel free to indulge our aggression, but that we laugh at murder; this is clear if we compare *Coronets* with other fictional forms where we are invited to ‘get our vicarees’, as Lee Marvin – no doubt an expert in the subject – put it: all the films and novels which invite empathy with a violent hero, obviously, and, at the outer limit of such identifications, de Sade’s *Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*, that ultimate catalogue of scatological and aggressive desires untrammelled by any morality. At the very least we would have to say that the manner in which desires were indulged was significantly different in the case of comedy.

Moreover, the traditional interpretation of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* rests on the supposition that we identify with the central character. There is indeed good reason to suppose this: as Barr says, the narrative drive of the film is exhilarating because ‘it sets the teeming energy of a subjective vision against a stuffy official surface’ (p 121), and this drive is directly harnessed to Louis’ point of view by the use of voice-over. However, there are two problems with this analysis. First, aggressive identification with a speaker, in the form of enjoying a joke at someone’s expense, depends upon the butt of the joke being a butt proposed by the speaker in question. But Louis is not making jokes, much of the time: he is – you should pardon the phrase – deadly serious. Of course, sometimes it is his cynical jokes that arouse our laughter (his remark to Sibella’s fiancé on their wedding day, having just spent the night with Sibella: ‘You’re a lucky man, Lionel, take my word for it’, for example), but often what we laugh at is an incongruous situation created by his immorality, as we shall see. When we laugh at the situation rather than laugh with Louis there is no question of identifying with Louis in the way that is supposed in the interpretation that makes the core of the film the indulgence of murderous ambition. Second, there is an entire section of the film which, while preserving the narrative mechanisms Barr analyses, makes us laugh *at* Louis, thus proposing a directly counterposed mechanism of identification: in his downfall, the trial scene and Sibella’s subsequent visit to the condemned cell, the source of the humour is the irony that his downfall is as fundamentally unjust as his rise.

Thus it is clear that any interpretation of the film must insist on the

level of the narrative that is constituted by its comic nature, for this is the level of the pleasure of the text, the level at which it does its ideological work. We shall see whether this leads us to offer a new interpretation. Curiously, too, the traditional interpretation has difficulty in accommodating the title of the film, which, as is made clear in the course of the story, is a quotation from Tennyson about the nature of class: is nobility a question of birth and rank, or a question of character? And yet the centrality of this quotation to the meaning of the film is clearly signalled in the manner of its introduction into the dialogue. Its ironical meaning is very heavily underlined in the discussion between Louis and Edith about the obligations and privileges of birth; the irony is that Edith understands the quotation to indicate Louis' superiority to mere material privilege, whereas the audience is fully aware of Louis' obsessive interest in just that. And it is introduced into the film at a turning point in the narrative: this scene is the moment at which Louis starts to manoeuvre his way towards Edith, thus bringing about his eventual downfall because Edith makes Sibella jealous. Moreover, the reason why Louis eventually comes to prefer Edith to Sibella is not because she is any more available or any more beautiful, but because she has 'class' – the contrast between the two women makes Sibella seem cheap to him – and this decision is integrally related to one of the key themes of the film, that Louis has the soul of an aristocrat as well as (half) the blood. This should be sufficient to indicate that the title is, so to speak, a condensation point of many themes integral to the film. Thus we are confronted with the necessity of approaching the film via considerations of the nature of comic enunciation, and we can recognise that the title of the film gives us a hint about its overt subject matter: the relative merit of character and rank in determining class position. We shall see whether there is any degree of convergence between the approaches dictated by these two starting points.

Semantic theories of the comic conventionally refer to incongruity as the basis of its structure. For N. Schaeffer, for example, it is the balance between congruous and incongruous elements in any statement that is responsible for comic effect.¹⁰ Freud's theory of the specificity of the semiotic level of the joke asserts that it is the balance between sense and nonsense that enables the instincts to subvert the inhibitions that usually control their behavioural expression. As I argue in *The Logic of the Absurd*¹¹ such models are easily overpredictive – conflating, for example, the comic with the metaphoric – and the way beyond such impasses lies in ascribing a specific balance to the congruous and incongruous elements in the joke statement: the basic semantic structure of a joke is that it is always more implausible (or incongruous) than it is plausible (or congruous). Take, for example, a creative addition to the police bomb alert posters found all over the London underground during the 1970s. The slogan reads 'Be alert', followed by details of what to look out for; in handwriting, underneath the slogan, is added 'England needs more "lerts"'. This is highly implausible/incongruous because

¹⁰ N Schaeffer, *The Art of Laughter*, Columbia University Press, 1981, chapter 1.

¹¹ J Palmer, *op cit*, chapter 1.

the word 'lerts' is a nonsense invention; it is plausible because if 'a' and 'lert' were separated, the additional slogan would be possible. The addition is implausible for a second reason: people are not meant to treat public service advertising – or indeed other advertising – so disrespectfully; it is plausible in so far as the addition is possible, as we have just seen; comedy derives from the balance between these two elements.

There are two main sources of humour in *Coronets*. The first is the absurdity of the line of aristocratic fossils, all played by Alec Guinness, who stand between Louis and the succession. The subterfuges of the cousin whose wife's principles force him to drink surreptitiously, the parson's pedantic interest in arcane features of provincial church architecture, the admiral's stubborn ignorance and final demise in the famous shot of him saluting as the water engulfs him: all of these are rich in a humour whose basic structure is the contradiction between 'normal' behaviour, and excessive dedication to some element of life which may be worthy in itself but whose excess is ridiculous. Such excesses are implausible because excesses, but a little plausible because excess is rooted in something which, pursued more modestly, is normal. By concentrating such qualities in an aristocratic family which is standing in the hero's way, the film ensures that we have no sympathy for Louis' victims (the exception, the banker, is allowed to die a natural death so that Louis will not be contaminated by guilt); it also implies that they do not deserve the title any more – or perhaps deserve it less – than Louis; we shall see how this obvious proposition is related to what is implied by the level of enunciation.

This comic presentation of the victims produces the insulation necessary to prevent sympathy obtruding. Similarly, the actual deaths are presented as minor mishaps by emphasising their incongruities: the punt going over a weir as the occupants are making love, the duchess shot down while in a hot air balloon ('I shot an arrow in the air/She fell to earth in Berkeley Square'); even Louis' father's death is presented in a comic light, as he keels over right at the beginning of a shot, and at exactly the moment he is shown his baby son for the first time.

The second main element of the film's comedy derives from the level of cynicism about human life and the associated moral values which are manifest in both Louis' and Sibella's behaviour, and implied by the audience's enjoyment of the humour which derives from it. Where Louis is concerned, this is obvious. Sibella's cynicism is partly directed at the institution of marriage: she marries for money, is an adulteress out of boredom, condones Louis' career as a murderer but cannot accept that he will not share its rewards with her, and blackmails him into committing a further murder as the price of his life. It is this second source of comedy, and the mechanism by which it is made to yield up its pleasures, that is the focus of all interpretations of the text; for the ridicule directed at aristocratic fossils is primarily a contributory mechanism for ensuring that we do not judge Louis' career harshly.

The murder of the first heir to the dukedom is accomplished by

¹² This shot is also in flagrant breach of the 180 degree rule of realist editing, for Louis is apparently facing in the opposite direction to the point where the punt has exited from the frame in the preceding sequence; this is because the camera has moved from one bank of the river to the other between the shots. So much for realism! This is only significant to the extent that traditional interpretations of Ealing insist that its films were overwhelmingly cast within the traditions of realist cinema; in a comedy such minor infractions simply pass unnoticed.

drowning him and his mistress as they are making love in a punt on the river. He has already been portrayed as an unpleasant snob, in order to neutralise any temptation we might feel to see things from his point of view. Louis' voice-over tells us that he can only succeed in his attempt because he has fortunately learned to swim 'at the Clapham municipal baths'; this detail is implausible, first because such a detailed account is unlikely under these circumstances, second because of the disparity between Louis' ambition and refined upper-class voice, and the class ambience suggested by Clapham baths; such incongruity undermines any temptation to take the murder seriously. As they disappear over the weir there is a cut-away shot of Louis up to his waist in the river looking eagerly out of frame with an expectant grin on his face, which effectively ensures that we see the murder not as murder but as an unusual way of achieving ambition.¹² And immediately afterwards his voice-over tells us that he was sorry for the girl but 'was consoled by the thought that she had presumably already undergone a fate worse than death': a remark which clearly has a zero truth value (and is therefore incongruous), again ensures a non-serious, cynical reading of the incident (nor does he need any consolation). Here, of course, we laugh with Louis.

The murder of the photographer heir is accomplished by substituting explosives for the photographic chemicals and alcohol in his darkroom garden shed. As Louis and Edith sit drinking tea in the garden a muffled explosion is followed by a cloud of smoke drifting over the garden wall behind Edith, which Louis *apparently* does not see, and she genuinely does not. The source of humour is the incongruous juxtaposition of the polite ritual of upper-class tea, in the company of the victim's wife, with the symptoms of death; here we are laughing at a situation that Louis has created, rather than with him at a butt of his joke.

His dispatch of the photographer heir is accompanied by Louis' first manoeuvrings in the direction of establishing a social presence for himself in his family. On being introduced to Edith, whom he eventually marries, having made her a widow, he finds out that she has 'principles' (primarily teetotalism) and decides, in a voice-over comment, to play on what he sees as her 'priggishness'. When she invites him to lunch he pretends to a high degree of delicacy, explaining that he has been surprised and embarrassed to find out that he is related to her and her husband, given the situation deriving from the family's disowning of his mother. Edith, true to her 'principles', or 'priggishness', praises him for his tact, which she takes as a reliable indication of his true nobility, and, quoting Tennyson, insists on his staying. This 'delicacy', in the context of the voice-over about his tactics, is of course consummate hypocrisy, and the source of the comic pleasure of the scene. The comic incongruity here arises from the divergence between the two meanings of what Louis is saying: on the one hand, that which derives from the words he uses and the meaning Edith attributes to them; and, on the other, the incompatible meaning given to them by the preceding voice-over.

In the trial scene, Sibella gives the evidence that will damn Louis in a



*Kind Hearts and
Coronets: Edith
praises Louis for his
tact*

hypocritically faint voice and dressed in widow's weeds. We know that everything she says is a lie; she appears to be overcome by her husband's death, while we know that she could not stand him any more and had only married him for the money he no longer has. This is to be understood in the context of an earlier scene in which Louis and Sibella have had a row and he has thrown her out to make room for his forthcoming marriage to Edith. Here, too, the comedy derives from the divergence between the two levels of meaning that constitute her hypocrisy. The same is true of her visit to the death cell: in exquisitely modulated English, couched in terms of polite regrets, she indicates that he can buy his life by murdering Edith and marrying her: the same level of hypocrisy, the same mechanism of comic pleasure.

The divergence between the two meanings of each of these scenes is highly implausible. *Any* divergence of meaning is implausible – this is the source of pleasure of the pun – but the divergence revealed in these sequences is monstrous. In the first place it is extreme; the divergence is between one interpretation of a set of words and another which is not just different from it, but opposed to it. In the second place this divergence is not just a question of difference and opposition at the level of what is meant, but also at the level of moral evaluation; the surface meaning refers to something that is good – usually exquisite manners –

whereas the hidden meaning refers to the height of immorality. But at the same time that each statement is highly implausible, it is also highly plausible, for the innocent meaning is indeed perfectly possible, not just in the sense that it is linguistically possible but in the sense that the circumstances in which it is spoken make it perfectly possible too. In other words, it is possible at the level of performance as well as at the level of competence.

This list of examples is by no means exhaustive, but it provides a key for understanding the level of *Coronets* which is responsible for the pleasure that the film gives. In each of these instances we have been able to see how a particular incident creates comic effect in the form of its enunciation. What remains to be seen is how it is this very process which is responsible for the ideological effectivity of the film.

It is central to the logic of the absurd that meaning resides in discourses, both in the sense that it is organised discursively in the moment of enunciation, and in the sense that the semantic meaning of words, their lexicality, derives from social discourses, not from some non-situated paradigm. In the examples cited both levels of meaning derive from a discourse that is fundamental to the concept of class in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century (and before). In each case the innocent meaning of what is said derives from the notion of manners. Louis expresses his regret for the girl's death in terms that refer directly to the most conventional morality ('a fate worse than death'); his delicacy in offering to withdraw from Edith's house because of the embarrassing situation is the height of tact and proof of breeding; Sibella's lies are exactly what she ought to be saying, in exactly the way she ought to say them, if the situation were in fact what she said it was. In each of these instances Louis gives further proof of what we already know from his courage in the face of death, his accent and his deportment: he is enough of an aristocrat in every surface way to be indistinguishable from the genuine article, hence the ease with which he fits into every advance his crimes bring him. The film is noteworthy for the detailed observation of linguistic elegance, deportment and ritual, between them adding up to the portrait of a set of appearances which constitute one level of a class, a level which consists essentially in being visibly and audibly different from other classes.

The other layer of meaning in those instances of double meaning derives from unscrupulousness: in each instance the second, incompatible, 'inadmissible' meaning is that Louis or Sibella is out to get exactly what he or she wants without the slightest regard for the constraints of morality. But this too is inseparable from the discourses of class, for this unscrupulousness is merely ambition without the usual trammels, as the traditional interpretation insists: he or she is the incarnation of the 'Utopian impulse' to kill whoever gets in the way of rapid ascent through the class system. Louis is a modern version (as is Sibella) of those monsters of ambition who populate the Jacobean theatre, but viewed positively – more exactly, viewed comically, where comedy

neutralises the negative judgments of morality. He is a happy Steerforth blackmailed by a joyfully immoral little Em'ly, Dorian Gray without the portrait, Bulstrode without the guilt. In short, he and Sibella are the incarnation of both greed and that ambition to rise through the ranks of the class system which is one element of a meritocratic conception of class, and which has been at the heart of debates about class since the Renaissance. It is also an element for which there is unfortunately no place in Tennyson's and Edith's scheme of things, for in a mobile society ambition is neither the privilege nor the obligation of rank; it is one of its sources.

One final example demonstrates how far this sense of class penetrates into the text of the film: it is by the hangman's behaviour that we first learn that this is a comedy, thus providing us with the cue we need to perceive everything that follows in a comic light. In the opening scene we learn that he is retiring, after a lifetime of public service, and that hanging a duke is a fitting crown to such a career, for after using a silk rope he can 'never again be content with hemp'. His most visible concern, however, is to make sure that he addresses his 'client' correctly, and as he walks away he practises little bows, muttering 'Good morning, your Grace' as he goes. At the end of the film, as the time for the death sentence to be carried out approaches, he insists on reading an improving little poem to Louis, which begins 'My friend! while yet . . .', at which point he interrupts himself: 'Oh! I beg your pardon, your Grace! Hrra . . . Hmm. . . Your Grace! While yet . . .'. Under the circumstances, such concern with the proprieties is incongruous in the extreme. In principle, excessive deference is a form of sarcasm, yet it is clear that this is far from the hangman's intention; on the contrary, he is so impressed by rank that he is unable to see the incongruity involved, and is thus ridiculous. His behaviour is ridiculous because inappropriate, and inappropriate because it is – ultimately – bad manners. His behaviour announces one of the two main themes of the film: the role of manners.

The other sources of laughter, we have seen, are the stupidity of the aristocratic fossils Louis dispatches, the treatment of death as a minor mishap and the hypocrisy manifest in Louis' and Sibella's behaviour. To ridicule the traditional aristocracy both provides an insulation against negative judgments of Louis' career and implies a meritocratic conception of class. The treatment of death as a minor mishap derives from the incompatibility between its presentation and its normal social meaning, and also serves the purposes of insulation. The humour which comes from cynicism and hypocrisy is based in the divergence between two layers of meaning both derived from the discourse of class. We laugh at Louis' victims and at the hangman: the latter because of his misunderstanding of manners, the former because they are so signally lacking in the leadership qualities of drive and intelligence. We laugh at the situations Louis creates, or with him, for in his behaviour is revealed a perfect understanding of class, very unkind hearts and exquisitely worn coronets. Our identification is less with Louis and his ambition



The hangman
addresses his
'client'

than with the vision of the world which is the presupposition of the humour that is created in the enunciation of the text.

Thus the core of the film lies in the repeated mechanism for arousing mirth that we see revealed in these instances. In what ways does this interpretation differ from the traditional ones? Essentially the difference is this: in the traditional interpretation the core of the film is the identification with a figure whose humorousness allows the surreptitious playing-out of illicit desires, namely the desire to ascend through the class hierarchy and enjoy its benefits. In the interpretation proposed here, the core of the film does not involve this kind of identification at all, but an assessment of the nature of class without any reference to (illicit) desires to indulge in murderous ambition. Indeed, if such desires were the core of the film's pleasure, how would it be possible to laugh at the elements in it where Louis is very directly the victim – and perhaps especially the final line, as Louis realises that his memoirs make him very vulnerable.

If such a reading is valid, class in *Coronets* is both the surface appearances of manners and the unscrupulous self-assertion manifest in Louis'

and Sibella's behaviour – and nothing more. Louis' victims are fatuous oafs, fossils waiting to be buried; the only person who genuinely conforms to the 'best' Victorian definition of class is Edith, and she is dismissed as a priggish fool, who marries a murderous adulterer believing him to be a gentleman in her own sense of the word. And yet – the final paradox – the film does nothing to suggest that class hierarchy is fundamentally wrong. Louis may resent his exclusion from the aristocracy, but he is certainly no leveller; quite the contrary. All the implications of the film point to the conception of hierarchy which sees it as entirely lacking in the traditional moral justifications, and yet eminently desirable because of the rewards it brings.

Does this reassessment of *Coronets* have any implications for our understanding of the output of the Ealing Studios in general? Conventionally, Ealing has tended to be aligned with the Labour Government of 1945. The social dramas have been interpreted as proposing – in some form or other – the ideal of a national community, in which the traditional divisiveness of class would be palliated by some higher commitment. Thus in *The Blue Lamp* (directed by Basil Dearden, 1949), for instance, this ideal is incarnated both in the police as a functioning 'community' in its own right and in its relations with the wider community. In the comedies, the pro-Labour alignment is seen in terms of the 'affectionate' satire of Labour's institutions, where the restrictions imposed by Government are circumvented in funny but impossible attempts to realise an ideal community which would be a better incarnation of the political ideals of social democracy. In this context, *Coronets* tends to be seen as something of an exception: sharper, harsher, less affectionate, less whimsical. Indeed, it is easy to see, if *Coronets* is as cynical as I am proposing, why such a conclusion is tempting. But note that the cynicism of *Coronets* is located at an altogether different level of the film's structure than are the mechanisms which produce the alignment with Labour, which are essentially plot elements which can be translated relatively unproblematically between their 'real-life' referents and the text of the film. What the enunciative mechanism of *Coronets* reveals is rather a 'political unconscious', to use Fredric Jameson's term in relation to narrative.¹³

The cynicism about class is not to be found at all in mechanisms like the supposedly unproblematic 'real-life' references in the portrayal of the police in *The Blue Lamp*, but in a narrative mechanism which turns such references on their heads. Manners are a mask for unscrupulousness or the incarnation of mediocrity, as is virtue – a political unconscious indeed, and one crowded with far from Utopian drives! It is interesting the *The Blue Lamp* can also be interpreted in a way that reveals a political unconscious, albeit of a different kind. It is clear that in this film the price that is paid for the idealised community it portrays is the exclusion of sexuality: Dixon's largely sexless marriage (a son by proxy, evenings looking after geraniums and singing in the police choir); the consistent portrayal of sexuality in the minor characters as some-

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, London, Methuen, 1981.

¹⁴ This reading derives from Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, op cit, and J Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, London, British Film Institute, 1986, especially pp 70ff.

thing to be rejected (the jeweller and his mistress, the couple in the doorway moved on by the police, the arguing young couple of witnesses, the 'bigamous' boy). The only consistently sexually attractive and active people are the villain and his girl-friend.¹⁴ Here one could say that the political unconscious is given over to the necessity of repression as part of the general process of exclusion of all the forms of difference that are responsible for disruption of the idealised potential community. How many other Ealing films are part of a similar unconscious?

If we read these films against the grain in this way, their relationship to the politics of the period is rather more ambiguous than previous interpretations have argued. Perhaps this reading is a product of the refractive prism of the 1970s and 1980s? If we read *Coronets* in terms of the cynicism suggested by its enunciative mechanism, it is not difficult to see relevance to the British situation today, a society in which class is all surface plus greed. Does anybody seriously believe (and especially in Government circles) in *noblesse oblige*?



fantasy AND THE *cinema*

Edited by JAMES DONALD



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SLAP-HAPPINESS: THE EROTIC CONTRACT OF 'HIS GIRL FRIDAY'

BY MARTY ROTH

HOWARD HAWKS' 1940 FILM is a crisp and rollicking sequence of movement and speech; it is all great fun, and it ends in a conventional register of success. If some of us feel that the reconciliation of Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) and Walter Burns (Cary Grant) is unseemly, the film is not aware of this and treats the ending as just the right thing. Only, while all this fun was going on, a prostitute named Mollie Molloy (Helen Mack) threw herself out of a second-storey window. She didn't die, but there is no report on her condition; no attempt is made to recuperate her into the happy ending. If this were a detective story, a smart move would be to assume that the purpose of the crisp speech and movement was to create a cover for the bumping off (or bumping up and down) of Mollie Molloy.

The film dances over broken bones. At its mid-point, it dramatises a need to get rid of Mollie in the sense of both crushing her and forgetting about her. This sequence takes place just before Walter first enters the press-room, and he waves aside Hildy's hushed report – possibly the only real news in the film, as Mollie had declared just before she jumped: 'I'll give you a story, I'll give you a wonderful story, only this time it'll be true.'

The crippling of Mollie Molloy spells out a garbled message, and, since the audience has traditionally been instructed in how to read this film by Walter/Cary Grant/Howard Hawks, it is ignored. Certainly the film is constructed to make us understand, in a general way, that in marrying Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy), Hildy would be throwing her life away, but just as certainly the freight of Mollie's image is not supposed to be attached to that understanding. Mollie is a version of Hildy, but a version that belongs to another story that is thrown out of the window and forgotten. Mollie is also a career woman who yearns to be private and domestic. Unlike Hildy, Mollie is the image of the devoted woman who will sacrifice all for love and the promise of private happiness. This other story had already been told five years earlier in a pretty and false way, in another film directed by Hawks, *Barbary*

Coast.¹ There, the opposition between professionalism and domesticity is resolved in the other direction and in another register – that of sentiment rather than cynicism. To the credit of *His Girl Friday*, it is the other story – the woman throwing up her work to fulfil herself in love – that is most often told; for example, in *She Married Her Boss* (directed by Gregory la-Cara, 1935), *Lady in the Dark* (directed by Mitchell Leisen, 1944), or *Hired Wife* (directed by William A Seiter), another film made in 1940 with Rosalind Russell.

Against its own interests, the film is suggesting that Hildy's circuit back to Walter, however much it may be celebrated, is also crippling and suicidal. Hildy, like Mollie, jumps out of a window to get away from a newspaperman: holding his hand to his heart, Walter tells her 'There's been a lamp burning in the window for you honey, here', and Hildy snaps back, 'Oh, I jumped out of that window a long time ago'. The last image in the film is of a crushed and battered Hildy: she is loaded down like a beast of burden and off-balance as she hurries to keep up with Walter, and at the same time, transfer a suitcase from her chest to her hand, as Walter had ordered.

This article follows two previous readings of *His Girl Friday*.² They need to be written over for one obvious reason: they are both written within the ideology out of which the film was produced and they are put in place to protect that ideology. Because the film performs and celebrates the pairing (and hence, by inference, the love) of Walter and Hildy, they justify this connection, primarily by valorising Walter, by making him sufficient to a legitimate mastery and by reducing Hildy to an insufficiency. I want to protest this intuitively. The great trap or hoax of the film is the attraction of Cary Grant/Walter Burns marked by the knowledge that he is despicable – the problem of the *darling*. Hildy states the problem: Walter is 'wonderful in a loathsome sort of way', but the obverse points it more clearly – he is loathsome in a wonderful sort of way. No one should want to be in his company, much less connected to him, for any period of time. It is as if the film accepted a perverse challenge, blindly to celebrate a damaging relationship as a happy union; and Hildy has already packed this understanding into a pun: 'he should make some girl real happy – slap happy'.

The film begins presenting the relationship between Hildy and Walter as a painful one: Hildy has divorced Walter and wants to stay free of him. At the end, the film proposes a resumption of their relationship. It does so quite thoughtlessly and callously. There is no suggestion that anything has changed during the period of their separation, and, as a result, it *must* assert that what is different now, and terminal, is Hildy's need for victimisation. Narrative assurance masks the utter rupture of the ending. It is so brazen, so out in the open: it just happens. (The condition of Hollywood endings is staged in a Grant film of 1939, *In Name Only*, directed by John Cromwell. Believing that his love for the character played by Carole Lombard is hopelessly blocked by his wife, he has lost the will to recover from pneumonia. The doctor tells Lombard the

¹ *Barbary Coast* is also, in a small way, about a newspaper editor who takes on a crooked city machine, but, there, 'busting the machine' is initially literal and is inflicted by Edward G Robinson's bully boys on the newspaper itself.

² Stanley Cavell, 'Counterfeiting Happiness', in *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1981, pp 163-187; and Gerald Mast, *Howard Hawks, Storyteller*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp 208-242.

³ Tom Powers devotes his pioneering article, 'Screwball Liberation', *JumpCut* no 17-19, April-December 1978, to this topic, but, as with Cavell and Mast, the equations he finds are patriarchally dictated.

prescription for fixing patients and films, and his assured tone of voice leaves us in no doubt that it will not fail: 'Tell him whatever you think he wants to hear. You must tell him that there is hope, in fact, tell him that there is certainty. If you think he wants you to say that you love him, then say that you love him, if you think he wants to hear that an obstacle in that love has been removed, then tell him so.') And, as if to mark the absurdity of it, we are forced to witness the transformation of a sparkling, active character into a 'woman' or 'infant' – a crying, whimpering, pleading Hildy Johnson. As part of its gaiety, the film even calls off the honeymoon for the second time – one of Hildy's specific complaints when she was trying to make Walter see that the marriage was impossible.

The major question raised by *His Girl Friday*, then, is why Hildy chooses to return to Walter for the last time. Going away and coming back are connected and involved, not simple and separate. The film opens by going out of the city room in order to come back in. Hildy, who has been away, comes back to Walter to tell him that she is going away. There is no clear answer to this major question, simply the neurotic complications of narrative and an historical set of anxieties about sexual difference. I propose, first, a close reading of the gender logic of the film³ as this is suspended by the overriding value of the *darling* – the narcissistic and exhibitionistic male performer. The affective bond that cannot be asserted at the level of gender can be written self-reflexively: Hildy stays connected to Walter for the same reason we do – a reason that is figured by hypnosis (a figure that has severe implications for criticism) and countered by the more theatrical trope of the *double cross*.

However obvious the outside reason for Hildy's return, it must always be stated: the story is the one we expect from Hollywood cinema and the one we always read. Cary Grant is the leading man, Ralph Bellamy is only a supporting actor. The audience has been taught to demand this resolution. The film was set up to work this way. Hildy's return to Walter is a frame-up, a double-cross, the crime that the apparatus was designed to perform. The power that watches over *The Morning Post* is the power that wills Hildy and Walter back together, the power of dominant narrative. Given its history, we can say that it was set in place to do what it does repeatedly, to enact the subjugation of women in the name of fulfilment and happiness.

One of the strategies used to fix Hildy's decision is to naturalise it: she is a 'born' 'newspaperman'; reporting is in her 'blood'. Rival journalist Sanders gives the marriage six months, then three months, and offers three to one against it. We see Hildy responding immediately to the ringing of a fire bell, which locates reporting at the level of a reflex (or an addiction). Hildy is, also naturally, a superb reporter, although this is fantastically represented: she is the only reporter of six who knows what and where the story is – better yet, the only reporter capable of making the story happen. Hildy confirms all of this in her parting speech to Bruce: 'If you want me, Bruce, you've got to take me as I am instead of



His Girl Friday:
Hildy and Walter
handcuffed

trying to change me into something else. . . . I'm a newspaper man'. Along the line of theme, then, we are merely watching Hildy discover the truth about herself.

Both Stanley Cavell and Gerald Mast balance their readings of the film on these 'natural' truths: Hildy belongs to the newspaper game, and Hildy and Walter belong together. The way this is expressed by the title, however, suggests that Hildy belongs to Walter. The natural for Mast is present through a resonance which he calls 'exuberant teamwork' (p 209), which is a curious knot, since acting more naturally signifies falsity or hoaxing; for Cavell, it is the quality of the two being 'at home with one another' (p 167). As additional evidence, Mast cites the scene where Hildy and Walter are handcuffed together, 'a linking that even the corrupt mayor . . . believes makes them "look natural"' (p 236); and the unused script ending for the film, a shotgun wedding, with the barrel of the gun 'trained on a still recalcitrant Hildy' (p 241). Leaving aside the authority of a corrupt mayor, the images are hardly natural, or even neutral; they express a violent conjunction, a fascistic fantasy of nature, which has always played a large part in the dreamwork of Hollywood.

For both Cavell and Mast, Walter is the more natural of this natural pair: he is aware of his nature, while Hildy is not. Once again the woman is guilty of deficiency, of lack, and once again the man is simply in the position of teaching the woman her nature. In the film, Walter claims that he created Hildy, and Mast reproduces that fiction outside the film: Walter is allowing Hildy to become a 'real and full "woman"' (p 239), forcing her to realise and repudiate her 'spiritual, moral, emotional, and psychological errors' (p 239). Cavell also sees Walter as educating

⁴ See Gretchen Bisplinghoff, 'Hildy Johnson – A Question of Gender', *Film Reader* 5, pp. 227–231.

Hildy, sending Hildy on the Williams story so that she may acquire a piece of saving knowledge; he is too 'good a therapist' (p 165) not to know her desires for her and prescribe for them. Given all this paternal affection, it is not only understandable, but right and natural, that the film should administer a loving punishment to Hildy at the end.

When Sanders predicts the doom of the marriage, he means two incompatible things. He means that Hildy will never leave the paper for marriage because it would be unnatural for her to do so and that she will never leave because Walter won't let her. However incompatible, both will be affirmed, scripted throughout. The second meaning is both offensive and absurd: you can't restrain people in that way, on the job or as a wife; what you get, if you could do it, isn't worth the having. But this is exactly what the film shows. If we attend only to the behaviour of Walter and Hildy, we could conclude that Hildy is beaten down, brain-washed, manipulated into subjection by an arrogant bully.

One way of putting Hildy's dilemma is that she must decide whether she is a man or a woman. This is a necessarily confused way of putting it, since man and woman here refer only to the gender constructions of popular culture. The gender equation at the heart of the film – the line along which we read with most delight – is that Hildy Johnson is a man.⁴ She is functionally male, performing a man's job in competition with other men and doing it much better than they can. She is also a man in the history of the text, slotted into a character space which is almost always designated as male – into a specific lineage occupied before and after her by a line of Hildebrand Johnsons: Lee Tracy, Pat O'Brien and Jack Lemmon.

In *The Front Page* directed by Lewis Milestone (1931), for some unknown reason Hildy yells after Peggy, 'If you want me you'll have to take me as I am, instead of trying to make a floozy out of me' – which is roughly what *His Girl Friday* does. Gender transformation is written into it and continues to haunt Hawks' projects, perhaps because it is the underlying secret of character in Hollywood comedy. Mollie Molloy calls the reporters 'tramps', and since she is a prostitute, she must restore to this bisexual term its feminine component. Hildy describes Bruce to Walter and he says: 'sounds like a guy I ought to marry'. As if in compensation, in *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), the sex-change (now transvestism) works the other way and is specifically fastened upon Cary Grant. Grant is also momentarily in drag in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), in a dressing gown with puff sleeves, a scene which is repeated in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953) and fastened upon Malone (Elliott Reid). Like Grant, he gets water spilled on his pants, but, unlike Grant, he is not in control of the ploy: he is humiliated and debagged by two suffocating females. *Bringing Up Baby* is also *His Girl Friday* writ backwards, and it is interesting that the opposition of male and female clothing corresponds to a manic-depressive opposition between Grant in *Friday*, on the one hand, and *War Bride* on the other. It is no longer a premise about character but a humiliating and victimising disguise, a

function of plot and situation: it's wonderful for a woman to be a man (under certain conditions), humiliating for a man to be a woman. In *Rio Bravo* (1959), someone as 'manly' as Sheriff John T Chance/John Wayne gets teased. Carlos/Pedro Gonzalez-Gonzalez holds the bloomers he has bought for his wife up to his waist as Feathers/Angie Dickinson passes the bedroom. She approves of the fitting, and calls after the retreating Wayne: 'Hey sheriff, you forgot your pants'.

Stanley Cavell has suggested that Hawks' title does not derive unilaterally from Defoe's novel but is mediated by the soap opera, *Our Gal Sunday*.⁵ Let me offer another candidate: *My Man Godfrey* directed by Gregory La Cava (1936). Most of Hildy's relationships and exchanges in the film are with men, with Hildy talking to men as a man. Her presence in the press room – entrance to which is barred to women – is accepted. Hildy is just one of the boys. In passing the cigarette to Earl Williams (John Qualen), she notices and apologises for the lipstick traces, a random and embarrassing sign of her femininity. She had refused the assignment at first, claiming it was the kind of 'poetic sob-sister stuff' she couldn't write. In her farewell speech, her contempt for the profession rests on a deeper layer of contempt for the newspaper readers whose frustrated desires make the whole circus move, and those readers are identified as private domestic women – 'A million hired girls and motor-men's wives' – precisely the class to which Hildy also claims she wants to transfer her allegiance.

Hildy's presence, then, does not promise or generate sexual energy. The film is remarkably devoid of any person or exchange that we can directly feel to be sexual. The easy intimacy of voice and body that Walter has with Hildy is not erotic. The figure given to Walter is that of

⁵ Stanley Cavell, op cit, p 168.



Earl Williams and Hildy, just 'one of the boys' in the press room

⁶ An enigmatic character – Joseph McBride, in *Hawks on Hawks*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982, lists him as Coaley; Mast as Jacobi; and Cavell as Dooley.

castration, and it is vaguely pointed at several times in the film: when Hildy, told that Walter is in a bad humour, cracks that 'somebody must have stolen the crown jewels'; when Walter deliberately spills water in his lap in the restaurant; when Walter tells Bruce a story against himself which cuts at least three ways – during his marriage to Hildy, she unexpectedly brought the Governor back to the hotel, not knowing he was there, and he 'came walking out of the bathroom without – mmmmp'. The most overtly sexually-constructed presence in the film, Diamond Louie's blonde, Evangeline, is seen twice briefly, in a stationary pose, and the only sexual plot in the film is a fraud – Bruce is arrested for 'mashing'. That the place of sexuality is outside the film is the message performed by reporter McCue, who locates it just outside the press room. He is nicknamed 'Stairway Sam' by fellow reporter Sanders because he regularly stations himself at the door or window, following the progress of women up the stairs of the Criminal Court building by twisting his neck and body as they move up and around in a futile attempt to see up their skirts. He tells us in another way that Hildy is not a 'skirt', and, in a remarkable cheesecake scene, the film reinforces this, as, facing the camera in a middle shot, she hikes her skirt up almost to her crotch so that she can run after Coaley.⁶

The light Hollywood rapture between Hildy and Bruce at the entrance to the city room proclaims that the sign of eroticism belongs to their relationship. But this quickly evaporates: Hildy's attitude to Bruce becomes one of an instructor toward a rather dim-witted child who can't get anything right. And in the scene where Hildy presumably makes her choice not to go to Albany, Bruce is given the woman's lines in the exchange. Sexuality in this film has been packed into adventure and delinquency – the absurd images of newspaper reporting at its 'best' that *His Girl Friday* celebrates. Hildy phones in the first Williams' story in a love-choked voice – her most erotic performance in the film. The opening opposition is presented as love and marriage to Bruce on the one hand, or success and excitement with Walter on the other – a phony semantic (a double-cross) because excitement is here the site of the erotic, and Hildy is 'married' to the paper. The film fuses them with only one side showing, and leaves, on the other, some vague dream of fussy domestic contentment, the 'death' we return to when the film ends. (Russell had earlier starred in the first film version of the play that most deeply inscribed domesticity as death in North American culture. In an uncanny move at the opening of *Craig's Wife* [1936], Harriet is away from home, in Albany [the site of domesticity in *Friday*] at the hospital bedside of her dying sister. Russell has two film voices, her competitive wise-cracking voice and a soft whispery one that she uses in *Friday* only in the opening scene with Bruce and the prison scene with Earl Williams. There is a series of roles that belong to the second voice, versions of the devoted domestic woman – in, for example, *China Seas* [1935] or *The Citadel* [1938]. The culminating role here would be her version of the totally understanding and nurturing woman/wife/mother

in *Roughly Speaking* [1945] contrasted with *Auntie Mame* [1958], where she undermines and explodes domesticity from within.) The domestic ideal, we are told elsewhere in the film, is also a lie; Mollie angrily accuses the group of reporters: 'Yuh made that up. And about my bein' his soul-mate and havin' a love-nest with him'.

Though femininity is marked by contempt, we are told that the tension which the film produces comes about because Hildy desires, in some way, to become a woman. Whether woman here is the private and domestic creature that she describes tauntingly to Walter and the reporters or whether it is the sexually desired creature that the early scene with Bruce evokes is not clear. Hildy's deepest dream is to have Bruce grafted on to Walter, to have Walter recognise her as a woman, have him fuss over her, pet her, coo to her and yet be her partner in exciting adventures and hoaxes. She will never get this, because the man she has chosen to load with these desires possesses, as one of his traits, an extremely misogynistic attitude.

Walter shows extreme anger only twice, both times towards a woman: once to Butch's girl, a 'ten-cent glamour girl', whom he threatens to kick in the teeth, and once to Mrs Baldwin, 'a grey-haired old weasel'. On the other hand, the three men who are nice to women, Bruce, Williams and Pettibone, are all locked up in 'jails'. We might take seriously Mollie's cry to the reporters (who are all tin-plate replicas of Walter): 'you're persecutin'

me, because Earl Williams treated me so decent and not like an animal'.

A private and feminine Hildy is given a one-time appearance in the early interlude with Bruce in the waiting room. This is a soft, dreaming Hildy, who allows herself to be lost in the spaces of imagined love – a Hildy with depth, at least to the extent that there is dissolution of the surface. When Hildy and Walter get together at the end, her voice will not be like this, but infantile and whiney. Hildy's passage through the *Morning Post* office is marked by a repudiation of femininity. While everyone stops work to greet her, there are only two moments of extended communication: the first a warm, girlish chat with two telephone operators and the second an aborted conversation with Beatrice, the advice-to-the-lovelorn columnist. Hildy accepts the first, but repudiates the second exchange. Beatrice wants to talk domestically, intimately, but Hildy keeps walking so that Beatrice has to deliver her lines to her moving back. Hildy tosses a wisecrack back over her shoulder. Beatrice is trying to talk about giving birth, and we could probably read the end of the narrative out of that episode.

One name for the private woman that Hildy yearns to be is 'mother', although the reporters picture it as a big laugh: 'Can you picture Hildy singing lullabies, and hanging out diapers?' A mother, Mrs Baldwin, figures prominently in the film. She doubles Hildy in several ways, most obviously as a woman who makes her way into the forbidden space of the press room; and she is also the accidental possessor of key secrets, of stories. But Hildy is opposed to Mrs Baldwin; for one thing, Hildy is the

reporter who always gets the stories, while 'mother' is the person who always blows them, leaks them. Mrs Baldwin is the 'original source', the informant whose testimony led to the capture of Earl Williams, but as we track past the reporters at their individual phones after his capture, she is denied, dissembled, rewritten as an 'anonymous note' and a 'mysterious telephone call'. A black child is born as the special rifle squad races across town after Williams. His mother goes into labour on the street, and they deliver the child, who is named after Sheriff Hartwell. But that birth is also criminal, and the deputies examine the child carefully to see if he is Earl Williams who, they believe, is hiding somewhere in the vicinity.

When Beatrice tells Hildy that her cat just had kittens, Hildy snaps, 'It's her own fault'. As the last in this series of gender identifications for Hildy, let me call her male-identified, because she is a second Walter. She is his errand boy, flunkey, stooge and straight man. She imitates him (although that is often no more than saying she is a good 'news-paperman', since the virtues of reporting in this film are also a profile of Walter): when Gus asks her what she will have for lunch, she says, 'Oh, I'll have the same [as Walter], I guess'; and one of the verbal figures performed by Hildy in the film is literal imitation, or copy-catting. Hildy has most of Walter's traits, and, through her performance, they are reproduced in yet another register of charm. She rattles off her own set spiels; she is verbally and physically manipulative – she tackles and sits on Coaley; she is rude and dismissive; she cons Bruce and Coaley. She uses Mollie and Earl Williams ruthlessly. Mrs Baldwin accuses her of being a double-crosser. Her featured interview of Williams (framed in a flamboyant expressionistic manner) is a hypnotic session, and it is set up in tandem with another hypnotic session, Dr Egelhoffer's interview with Williams. Hildy's interview is set at a low auto-suggestive level and she feeds Williams the script that she will later write up as her scoop.

Hypnosis is a major trope in the film, but it is Walter who is the master hypnotist. Hildy scornfully calls him 'Svengali', and Bruce tells him: 'she wanted to get away from you and everything you stand for, but you were too smart, you caught her and changed her mind'. Hildy's staying is patterned as a 'hooking in' to lures and a subjection to hypnotism – her decision to stay is made in a trance. Hildy is continually pulling free and then falling again under some spell or other, yet she is not the passive subject of hypnosis; she is a sharp, critical presence, countering Walter, devoting herself to his exposure. But the business of the film is to demonstrate Walter's power, and the place of the critic (of Hildy, of Dr Egelhoffer, of Cavell, of Mast) is identified as the most treacherous place to be.

Hildy's alternation between criticism and a hypnotic acquiescence is also located as a split in herself. She alternates between a determination to leave, to achieve distance, and a falling prey to the snares of Walter and 'story' (often literally Walter's; always equatable with Walter). The film is all about what Hildy wants. She says she wants a home and

respectability: the absence of narrative, of story; but the film goes on despite her protestations. Walter assigns no meaning to her statements of desire; he assumes that they are nonsense. Bruce also raises the question of whether that is what Hildy really wants. We are invited to wonder too and, according to the laws of narrative, to wonder is to know that that is not what she wants.

At the heart of the hoax of *His Girl Friday* is the paradox of the *darling*, the double bind of the contract to adore despicable behaviour. The darling and the star are always structurally synonymous, often characteristically so – nakedly in the narrative careers of actors like Erich Von Stroheim, Mickey Rooney, or Gene Kelly. As filmgoers, we are also the victims of hypnosis, and casting Cary Grant as a spell-binder or hypnotist writes into the role the power that constitutes it in the first place. It is, however (always) a terrible charm, charm within the context of an affectless nightmare; in the case of this film, charm as an autonomous mechanism.

Walter is an extravagant image of primary narcissism. Our first sight of Walter is of him looking at himself in a mirror and wearing a bib under his chin. Walter feels himself to be omnipotent and inhabits an unlimited subjectivity that is proof against otherness; he is, as Hildy calls him, the 'Lord of the Universe'. One of the strongest features of Grant's performance is that he acts as if he were alone and unimpeded on the set, talking to himself, peopling that space with effigies created out of his own shifting and inconsistent ideas. Walter notices the presence of other people with mild surprise: this mannerism, like most of his others, is poised on the edge of a put-on, but, even if it is a put-on, it is still narcissistic. Walter is upset by the mobility or density of others – he is furious that the Governor is not there when he wants him. Walter registers other people with difficulty; if they manage to infiltrate the mirrored surface of his narcissism he may respond to them with annoyance – Bruce in the press room – or, in the case of Butch's girl and Mrs Baldwin, he may shift into a frighteningly pathological key and respond to their obstructive presence with rage.

Walter's anarchic energy enters the line of the action as manipulation and appropriation, and this is centred in the hiding of Earl Williams in Bensinger's desk and Walter's subsequent hare-brained scheme to move the desk out of the courthouse and back to his own office. Walter appropriates other people's lives – he puts Bruce in jail twice, and the whole film is devoted to his manipulation and appropriation of Hildy – and their space: in the restaurant scene, Walter plays musical chairs with Bruce; he refuses to count off chairs, and when Bruce lowers himself into his appropriate social space, he finds himself sitting on Walter's lap; Walter then literally moves him with both hands down the line to the third chair. Throughout the scene that follows, Bruce is metaphorically sitting in Walter's lap, like a ventriloquist's dummy; earlier, Walter had patted his lap and beckoned Hildy to it, but she had refused.

Walter's impromptu finesse in moving people into the wrong place

Walter congratulates
the old man instead of
Bruce



Walter's impromptu finesse in moving people into the wrong place and putting people in their place is the subject of a wonderful piece of office theatre at the beginning of the film. Entering the reception room of the newspaper to greet Hildy's new fiancé, Walter walks by Bruce and warmly greets an old bald man instead, forcing Bruce to 'knock' at his arm – placing him in the role of a crude opportunist. Walter gratuitously exchanges the identities of the two men, while they sputter, fore and aft, in an attempt to correct his mistake. When he decides that the take has gone on long enough, Walter turns the scene, inverting the areas of warmth and chill that he established, now treating the old man as a cunning impersonator. He no longer shuts Bruce out, but, instead, he turns him into an object, first, by shaking the handle of his umbrella, and, secondly, by shifting his address to Hildy (who stands by, both sardonic and admiring), so that Bruce becomes the 'he' that they are talking about.

In the restaurant scene that follows, Walter controls the space and the talk. With the exception of two reaction shots of Hildy, every shot in the sequence goes through Walter. This dominance is encapsulated at the end of the scene: as Walter finishes his telephone conversation and moves to leave the booth, we see, in the background of the space he is just vacating, a small image of Hildy and Bruce at the table. In visual, emotional and theatrical terms, he is blocking and obscuring their relationship. As I mentioned earlier, both Mast and Cavell have an investment in defending Walter against charges of criminal abuse. Mast, who praises Walter for being a transcendental actor with Hildy – a performer so consummate that his acting is 'natural' – also acquits Walter on the

basis of bad acting: 'that Walter is that unscrupulous and selfish [is] . . . never really very convincingly established' (p 210). Cavell also reproduces a transcendental Walter: 'his transcendence of consequences makes him the embodiment of the idea of life as improvisation' (p 179). He asks us to see Walter's manipulation as a programme of Socratic 'illumination' designed to bring Hildy to the light. Cavell faces the problem of Walter and Mollie Molloy, sets up a sequence of possible readings that spin dizzily in a full circle, until he can conclude that Walter's indifference to her suicide is the nod of one consummate performer for another: 'Walter might even assume Molly [sic] knew what she was doing, even admire it as a successful piece of improvisation' (p 180).

Above all, Walter is a con-artist, a fabricator of ploys – a manipulator of events and people through pose and speech, through performance. He possesses an easy ability to shift shape verbally – to modulate through a variety of vocal roles and poses. This unhinged exhibitionism that may be said to belong to narcissism is the essence and the practice of the actor. What is instinctive in the infantile monster/darling/brat is social and professional in the actor. Cary Grant is a great actor, and Walter Burns is a great actor, and what Grant signifies through Burns is the actor and acting. Walter evokes the styles of Cagney and Robinson: machine-gun speech and control through energy. He takes his powerful mutter from W C Fields. The performer-as-performer he most resembles is Groucho Marx, who exists to appropriate space and speech, to browbeat, and to bully and abuse. Walter also functions as a director, as the director; he resembles the Hollywood director generally, and Howard Hawks in particular, in his single-minded pursuit of the story, at any cost, even that of human life.⁷ So it is no surprise that there is collaboration between the film and Walter, particularly in the matter of effacing Mollie Molloy and hooking in Hildy Johnson.

One of the things that *His Girl Friday* is about is what it so stunningly performs: sharp speech patterns, overbearing interchanges, stichomachia; it is a film about the disease of speech. The centrality of the telephone in this film has been noted: telephones ringing, interrupting, lunged for, or walked around and cradled like infants. The motif appears in the opening as we travel left and then return to two telephone operators at the threshold of the city room; they are bonded to Hildy but connected to Walter. The first functional use of the telephone, however is phone-y. Walter tells Gus to come to the table and tell him that there is a phone call for him. Later in the film, Hildy's story is torn up over the phone, and, a little later, the telephone connection between Hildy and Walter is itself torn out.

The rapid-fire staccato dialogue is primarily Walter's. He is pre-eminently associated with a controlling flood of male speech that he shares with his two most immediate models, Petruchio in *Taming of the Shrew* and Shrike in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Walter talks in order to leave no gaps through which other voices might enter. Walter never hears other

⁷ According to Captain Samuel Triffy, the technical advisor on *Air Force* (1943), 'Hawks and the film company "were ruthless! Absolutely ruthless! If they could have damaged [an] airplane in flight so I would have had an accident, they would have done it. Really! I couldn't trust them. I mean it."' Quoted in Lawrence Howard Suid (ed), *Air Force*, Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1979, p 21.



Walter lunges for
the phone

people or their dialogue. In the opening scene with Hildy she can't get him to hear what she has come to say: 'Are you going to listen to what I have to say', and Walter responds, 'Look, look, what's the use of fighting, Hildy? I tell you what you do, you come back to work on the paper.' Walter can't hear because he is constantly talking. Once he starts talking, he hypnotises himself. He can't be stopped or deflected by other people; it is not talk to an end, it will never come to a social or semantic close. He holds dialogues with himself, answers himself. The image of reporting that is so attractive and so paradoxical involves not listening to sources, but writing and attributing to them lines out of one's own brain track. When other people are talking, Walter has a habit of muttering or humming to himself, keeping alive the only voice that registers. In *Bringing up Baby* (1938) and *Arsenic and Old Lace* (directed by Frank Capra, 1944), Grant also talks and mutters to himself throughout, but for the opposite reason – because the others in his frame are shutting *him* out, refusing to acknowledge *his* anxiety.

Grant's voice, as it is used in most of his films in the 1930s and early 1940s, is a bizarre instrument – very metallic, highly theatrical, vaudevillean in its lilts and takes. Like the voice of the stand-up comic or blues singer, it is syncopated, often anticipating or dragging behind the beat. It is a powerful voice, always overcharged, both bursting with potentially aggressive energy and repressing that energy. This is the film where the role is written for the instrumentality of his voice. The voice cannot exhaust the energy of its source, and it is regularly inflected with muttering, popping, rumbling, a very peculiar percolator effect, vocal explosions and the like.

Grant's voice is a master of public rhythms – the voice of the high-

pressure salesman, of the huckster and the barker; it is the voice of hawking, and the speech unit is the spiel. At one moment of pure vocal identification, Hildy, who has been trying to get Walter to listen, has been cut off, drowned out, shouted down, and so she echoes and parodies Walter's prattle through the tobacco auctioneer's chant of merged and mangled words and sounds, keeping pace with Walter, finally bringing his speech to a halt, and capping it with 'Sold American'. Walter's speech is business, theatrically and economically; it is also 'the business'. Like the announcer, Walter comments on everything, repeating it again for an audience. Walter controls speech and keeps it diseased. Even when Walter says something as possible as 'Sorry to see her go', Hildy answers, 'I'd like to believe you meant that', because she knows that all of his verbal acts are gambits, situational punctuation, all lies. Hildy runs out of speech; Walter never does. Hildy defers, knowing that speech belongs to him. Not content with her acknowledgement of his power, Walter tries to tear down her writing too, dismissing her journalism in a scene that should strain credulity, considering that the movie has both announced and demonstrated that she is his star reporter.

Walter is the actor, the ham – the reincarnation of John Barrymore in *Twentieth Century* (directed by Howard Hawks, 1934), or, like Harry Greener, the broken-down vaudevillian in Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust*, a sequence of old takes with no centre. The mayor is Walter's double in this, always quoting from a campaign speech in syrupy prose, himself a master at shifting positions without a break for human response: 'Probably insane, drunk or something, why, if this unfortunate man Williams has really been reprieved, I'm personally tickled to death, aren't you Pete?' Like Walter, the mayor is misogynist and anti-family: he'd 'hang his grandmother' to get elected. And he is the only power figure in the film, apart from Walter. He is also the character who almost gets Walter, almost stops his charge – almost silences him.

A series of male figures is ranged in opposition to Walter. They are all versions of one another, or all versions of Bruce, the man who is to be rejected: the series consists of Bruce, Williams, Bensiger, Sheriff Hartwell and Pettibone. They are all exposed as pathetic or ridiculous, all inadequate men. Most of them are put away, put on hold, sequestered: Bruce, in jail twice; Williams, in jail, in an interview cell, in a desk; Pettibone in a safe house. (Hildy, at one point, snaps at Walter: 'I see. I'll keep. I'm like something in the icebox, aren't I?', and Walter says, 'Yeah'.) All of them are identified as victims, specifically as the butt of hoaxes or jokes. Several of them are connected by the image of the umbrella – Bruce and Pettibone carry one and Hildy harshly fancies that the Sheriff lent Williams an umbrella for his getaway – and by a characteristic drawl or whine in their voice. Bruce, Bensiger, the sheriff and Pettibone are all associated as family men: the first travels with his mother, the second writes 'mother' poems, the third has all of his relatives on the payroll, and the fourth cannot make a move without consulting his wife. Bruce and Williams are both in the numbers game, an

insurance salesman and a bookkeeper (as such, he 'belongs' in a desk). Bruce and Pettibone both come from small towns; more importantly, they both represent the nemesis of story, early closure.

The performance figure most centrally associated with Walter is, of course, the double-cross. He performs it casually, gleefully; it is an obsession masking itself as spontaneity. Walter double-crosses inconsistently, against his own interests: certainly his repeated attempts to renege on his promise to Hildy to exchange a life insurance premium for the story on Earl Williams should be fatal to his larger scheme, whether it be to get the Williams story or to get Hildy to stay. Walter double-crosses Bruce, Earl Williams and Bensiger. During Walter's first performance in the film, Hildy gibes, 'Well Walter, I see you're still at it'. Walter turns to her and says, 'first time I ever double-crossed a governor, what can I do for you?' and proceeds to institute a feature-length double-cross of Hildy.

The entire film is performed under the sign of the double cross, but its history is also written under that sign. The original ancestor, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page*, is dedicated to an intersection: to Madison and Clark Streets.⁸ The dedication or preface to *His Girl Friday* is also a double cross (or cross). The visual record starts in the depths of the city room, and we track back through the heart of that busy office. We are tracking a woman whom we leave at Duffy's cubicle. The camera continues to move left (through a dissolve just before the switchboard and an invisible cut at the boundary between newspaper and public space), and stops to pick up the figures of Hildy and Bruce who have just come out of the elevator. After a short scene over the low gate that separates the public waiting room from the professional offices, Hildy retraces the movement of the woman, through the city room, to the narrative excitement that waits on the other side in Walter Burns' executive office. Although Hildy exposes the contents of the city room, since everyone raises their body or their face to greet her (to say hello and goodbye), she and her story do not belong there, she is passing through. The work of putting a newspaper together is not the story that we are tracking. The opening sequence is a documentary which theoretically would go another (perhaps the opposite) way from the narrative we have contracted for.

On the level of comic technique, the double cross is a double take (or take – also a unit of filming and a unit of performing): it is a sudden shift of physical and emotional/cognitive direction that catches us by surprise, that disrupts our investment in continuity, but seduces us by its brevity and economy. Walter performs double takes from time to time, but, from this perspective, the centre of the film is the actor Billy Gilbert (as Pettibone), who takes the film to a movement as a vaudeville mode to which it doesn't belong. His performance is a series of double takes; he seems to be present in the film only to perform the double take.

Hoax, hypnotism, double-cross, double-take, the fictions pile up and they are all alternate figures for the story. The front page is a surface and

a cover for stories, and this equates it with the classical narrative film.⁹ The two stories are opposed, however, in that the front page story claims to be historically or socially central, of overwhelming relevance to the audience. But that is also a story. Like all newspaper movies, this story is about a story, getting a story, and that phrase covers both its production and its consumption. The legendary preface alerted us to this: 'In the "Dark Ages" of the newspaper game – when to a reporter "getting that story" justified anything short of murder'. Mollie Molloy pleads with the reporters to get her story straight, but the film demonstrates that no story is or can be got straight; there is no straight story to get. As Earl Williams is finally led away along the line of reporters, each whispers a different story into the phone to cover the pathetic arrest we have just witnessed. Pettibone stands out because he can't understand the stories that are told to him, but Walter, who as usual has the last word, jiggles with frustration in the presence of stories: everybody takes too long, no one can tell it directly enough for him.

⁹ Milestone's *Front Page* and *Friday* both open upon images of the newspaper: in the latter it is a newspaper one cannot read, the film happens on top of it; in the former, one must read the newspaper, submit oneself to the turning pages as the only way to get into the story.
